Inclusion and social disadvantage in the English education system: the role of area-based initiatives

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with social and educational inequalities understood as an issue of equity in the field of inclusive education. England can be understood as a socially polarised country, marked by significant inequalities. Because of a strong association between social background and educational outcomes, the English education system is also characterised by inequalities. Moreover, all of these inequalities are spatially patterned, with concentrations of poor social and educational outcomes in certain (urban) places. Successive governments have recognised this and have launched ‘Area-Based Initiatives’ (ABIs) aimed at breaking the link between education, disadvantage and place. The outcomes from these initiatives have been disappointing, and the paper explores the reasons for this. It argues that an important explanation is that ABIs have been based on an overly simplistic understanding of local areas and patterns of inclusion and exclusion within these. Nevertheless, the paper concludes that there are grounds for optimism. Drawing on illustrative case studies, it argues that there is space within English policy frameworks to develop approaches with a richer understanding of, and better co-ordinated intervention in, area dynamics. The paper concludes by considering the implications of this issue for the field of inclusive education research.
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1. The English Context
In international terms, the UK is a rich country. The combination of this overall affluence with well-developed welfare, health and education systems means that the country does not experience the depths of poverty, or the extremes of poverty and wealth that characterise some other countries, particularly those with developing or transitional economies. However, when it is compared with other similarly affluent nations, it becomes clear that the UK experiences a marked degree of social polarisation. A recent assessment from OECD, for instance, points out that the UK is well above OECD norms in terms of the gap between rich and poor, earnings inequality, the proportion of workless households, the number of people living alone or in lone-parent households, income poverty, and the lack of social mobility – and that childhood poverty, though falling, is still well above the levels of twenty or thirty years ago (OECD, 2008). Not surprisingly, commentators on equity issues frequently reach gloomy conclusions about the country.

As the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) puts it:

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2 The switches between ‘England’, ‘UK’ and ‘Britain’ in this paper reflect the complexity of governance arrangements. England is the largest and most populous part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (usually referred to as ‘the UK’ or ‘Britain’). The UK government is responsible inter alia for economic and fiscal policy, so data on these matters are typically collected at UK level. However, the different parts of the UK have different forms of governance for managing education. There are, therefore separate English, Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh education systems rather than a single UK-wide one.
Britain, despite its status as the fifth largest economy in the world, is still a place of inequality, exclusion and isolation. Segregation – residually, socially, and in the workplace – is growing. (CRE, 2007:1)

As this comment implies, there is a significant spatial dimension to patterns of inequality in the UK. In particular, concentrations of disadvantage exist at regional, area or neighbourhood levels (Atkinson 2000). Areas which are characterised as ‘deprived’ tend to have high levels of measured unemployment, ill-health, obesity, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy and innumeracy, poverty and welfare dependency, and unfit dwellings (Palmer et al 2007). Although disadvantage is by no means an exclusively urban phenomenon, there are concentrations in parts of many towns and cities. Moreover, this situation is dynamic. The UK became heavily urbanised and industrialised in the Nineteenth Century in response to the Industrial Revolution. This in turn brought concentrations of poverty in the major industrial cities (Hunt, 2004). However, the country experienced a marked decline in manufacturing industry in the latter part of the Twentieth Century, and although other forms of economic activity have taken the place of manufacturing, the change has left some parts of towns and cities stranded (Dorling et al., 2007). Here, the heavy manufacturing industries which once gave employment to millions have shrunk or disappeared, whilst the benefits of post-industrial economic activity have largely passed these areas by. The consequences of these changes are spelled out by Lupton:

That poverty is spatially concentrated is nothing new. Industrial Britain has always had poor areas and indeed, has always had studies of poor areas…However, over the last century, the relative deprivation of the poorest
areas has got worse as absolute poverty has diminished...The gap between the poorest local authority areas and the rest is widening. Moreover, the 1980s saw a particular increase in intra-urban polarisation, with increasing contrasts between poorer and more affluent electoral wards within cities...The evidence suggests both an increasing polarisation between neighbourhoods, at least during the 1980s, and the simultaneous and inter-linking concentration of multiple problems in the same places...Just as some individuals in society are socially excluded, with multiple disadvantages and few prospects, some neighbourhoods, where problems are concentrated, may also be at risk of exclusion, getting relatively more disadvantaged as other areas get richer.

(Lupton, 2001: 2)

These inequalities are reflected clearly in the English education system. Educational outcomes are heavily structured by social background (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; DfES, 2005a; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Machin & McNally, 2006; Fabian Commission on Life Chances and Child Poverty, 2006). Despite the heavy national investment in education, it remains the case in England that the family and social contexts in which children live are much more powerful in shaping their educational outcomes than are the characteristics of the schools they attend (Duckworth, 2008). Indeed, as a recent analysis concludes, socio-economic status is also more powerful than either ethnicity or gender:

The social class gap at [the end of statutory schooling] is 1.34 SD (contrast between higher managerial and professional vs. long term unemployed). This is substantially larger than the ethnic gap of 0.65 SD between the highest and lowest performing
ethnic groups (Indian vs. Black Caribbean). The gender gap at 0.23 SD is the smallest of all, though still significant. As a result the social class gap, and the poor attainment of pupils from low [socio-economic classification] homes whatever their ethnic group, ought to be seen as a cause for concern. (Strand, 2008: 2)

Not surprisingly, the spatial distribution of social disadvantage is reflected in a parallel distribution of poor educational outcomes. In broad terms, there are concentrations of poor outcomes in those areas where social outcomes generally are poor, and in the schools serving those areas (National Statistics, 2005; Ofsted, 2008). The mechanisms whereby social and economic disadvantages are translated into poor educational outcomes are complex. Rather than a simple deterministic relationship, it appears that there are complex interactions between material deprivation, social group cultures and family characteristics and dynamics (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Duckworth, 2008; Raffo et al., 2007). These complexities are increased when the spatial concentration of disadvantage is taken into account, and there are a number of channels through which the characteristics of place can impact on educational outcomes – through, for instance, impacts on learners’ aspirations and self-esteem, the limited social capital and survival strategies available to families, the lack of educational resources, the lack of support services, the availability of ‘non-standard’ life styles, the poor quality of schools, and negative effects on school processes (Lupton, 2006).

From an equity point of view, the relationship between area disadvantage and the characteristics of schools is particularly significant. Participation in education is
compulsory in England from the age of 5 to 16 (soon to be 18), and in practice large numbers of children and young people engage in education before and after these ages. Schools are, by international standards, well-resourced and teachers are well-trained. Moreover, over the past three decades, the quality of education has been a major political issue, with successive waves of reform directed at making the system as effective as possible. It is troubling, therefore, that the school system appears to have been unable to break the link between social disadvantage and poor educational outcomes in general, or, more specifically, between the concentration of disadvantage in particular areas and the concentration of poor educational outcomes in those areas. Indeed, far from being powerful motors for change, schools serving disadvantaged areas seem particularly fragile. Despite a system in which families are, within certain restrictions, free to choose schools for their children in any area, schools located in and around disadvantaged areas are likely to attract populations of students which themselves contain concentrations of disadvantage and hence of low achievement (Power et al 2002). As a result, they will have to work harder than other schools to achieve the basic conditions for their students to learn effectively (Ofsted 2000). They may find it particularly difficult to improve their performance – and hence the overall level of their students’ achievements (Harris and Chapman 2004). More than this, they may experience compositional effects, parallel to, or an intensified form of, those in the areas they serve, which will further depress their performance and their students’ achievements (Thrupp 1999, Lupton 2004). It is, perhaps, particularly telling that the 638 secondary schools targeted by the Government in 2008 as achieving ‘unacceptably’ low examination scores, overwhelmingly serve areas characterised by high levels of measured deprivation (Baker 2008). On the other hand,
‘top’ schools are likely to contain only handfuls of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (The Sutton Trust, 2005).

A situation in which marked social inequalities are reflected so strongly in unequal educational outcomes inevitably raises serious questions about equity in English society in general, and the English education system in particular. Moreover, although in England relatively few children are denied places at local, regular schools, the apparent reflection and reproduction of social inequalities by those schools makes it difficult to describe them as ‘inclusive’. In such a situation, the concentration of social disadvantage in particular areas and educational disadvantage in particular schools, creates both a challenge and an opportunity for policy makers. If, as seems to be the case, this concentration compounds the other forms of disadvantage that people experience, generating more equitable outcomes in the most disadvantaged schools and places may prove particularly challenging. On the other hand, the spatial concentration of disadvantage opens up the possibility that policy interventions too might be spatially-oriented. Perhaps, in other words, there are strategies that can be deployed in particular places that are more carefully targeted, different in form, and more effective than whatever generic interventions in social and educational disadvantage policy-makers are able to devise.

In the remainder of this paper, we will explore how policy in England has responded to these challenges and possibilities. In the next section, we will review briefly how policy-makers have understood issues of social and educational disadvantage, and how this has
led them to pursue what are usually known as ‘area-based interventions’ (ABIs). We will then examine the evidence for the effectiveness of these ABIs, the explanations that have been offered for their somewhat modest outcomes, and the possibilities that are now opening up for a new style of area-based approach. Finally, we will consider the broader implications of the situation in England, and, in particular, its implications for the field of inclusive education research.

2. Policy Understandings, Policy Responses
For many decades, British governments of all political complexions have been concerned by social inequalities and the ways in which disadvantages of different kinds produce and interact with each other. The landmark Beveridge Report (Beveridge, 1942), for instance, published by a coalition government during the Second World War, identified five ‘giants’ – Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness – that stood in the way of social progress. It argued for a comprehensive and radical strategy for tackling these giants, and is generally accepted as having laid the basis for a ‘welfare state’, established by the post-war Labour Government, but maintained more or less intact by governments of the right and left since that time. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the urbanisation of the country and the self-evident problems in many urban areas, policy efforts have been focused not only on universal strategies for tackling disadvantage but also on efforts targeted at the most problematic areas. This has been achieved in part through a vigorous system of local government, in which local authorities (LAs) have tailored services and led development strategies for the cities, towns, and counties for which they are responsible. There has also, however, been a long tradition of area-based initiatives
(Griggs et al., 2008; G.R. Smith, 1999) through which, typically, a partnership of central and local government has intervened in particularly disadvantaged areas at the sub-local authority level.

The same pattern has been evident in education. National policies, such as the introduction of ‘comprehensive’ schooling – that is, the abolition of selective secondary education in favour of a common school for all students – have, to a greater or lesser extent, sought to reduce educational inequalities (Benn & Simon, 1972). At the same time, the governance of the school system through local education authorities has made it possible for customised policies, practices and resourcing regimes to be developed in different administrative areas – not least because local government in England is supported substantially by central government grants based on a broad notion of need.

However, there is also a history of educational ABIs targeted at the most disadvantaged areas. Most notably, Educational Priority Areas (EPAs) of the 1960s and 1970s, introduced in the wake of the Plowden Report on primary schools (Central Advisory Council for Education (England), 1967), and targeting extra resources and support at schools serving hard-pressed areas (Halsey, 1972; G. Smith, 1987).

Taken together, ABIs of various kinds, set in the context of welfarist mainstream policies, constitute a significant attempt on the part of successive governments to establish a more equitable education system, and more equitable society. In more recent times, however, this history has been intertwined – and to some extent interrupted – by a post-welfarist approach (Tomlinson, 2001) placing greater emphasis on market and quasi-market
solutions, the citizen as consumer, and the policy goal of ensuring economic competitiveness. In education, this has taken the form of what would now be known as standards-based reform. Concerns about the overall quality of the education system, and its appropriateness to a restructuring economy, surfaced in the late 1970s in the Labour prime minister, Jim Callaghan’s, landmark Ruskin College speech (Callaghan, 1976). The Conservative (broadly, right wing) governments of the 1980s and 1990s acted on these concerns in a series of reforms – most notably, the 1988 Education Reform Act – aimed at increasing central control of the system, holding schools to account for the achievement of minimum standards, and introducing market disciplines into the education system by enabling families to choose where to have their children schooled (Bash & Coulby, 1989).

In 1997, the Conservative government was replaced by a ‘New’ Labour administration – ‘new’ in these sense that it explicitly rejected some of the cherished tenets of the left in British politics, embraced many of the reforms introduced by its Conservative predecessors, and sought a ‘third way’ (Giddens, 1998) between traditional left and right wing approaches. New Labour governments, therefore, far from abolishing the 1988 reforms, have consolidated and extended them, so that the focus on standards, high-stakes accountability, and marketisation are, if anything, even stronger than before (Phillips & Harper-Jones, 2003). However, the discourse of standards and choice has been modulated by an explicit concern with educational and social equity. Senior New Labour figures have insisted that their concerns are with ‘excellence for the many, not just the few’ (Blunkett, 1999a), and with ‘educating all our citizens properly’ (Blair, 2005); our
emphasis). A particular concern across all domestic policy has been with groups who are at risk of being ‘socially excluded’ because of the multiple disadvantages they experience, and for whom education potentially offers an escape route (Blunkett, 1999b). In this context, raising standards across the education system as a whole and, in particular, breaking the association between social disadvantage and poor educational outcomes, is crucial to the creation of a more equitable society. ‘That is why’, as the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Ruth Kelly, explained:

I see my department as the department for life chances. And that is why I see it as my job to boost social mobility…Our task is to make sure that for everyone involved in learning, excellence and equity become and remain reality

(Kelly, 2005)

In practical terms, this has meant that the standards-based reforms of the 1980s have been joined by a large number of interventions aimed explicitly at tackling social and educational disadvantage, and the relationship between them (Antoniou et al., 2008). Some of these have been targeted at individual learners and groups of learners. Perhaps most notable in this respect is the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2003), a broad initiative aimed at ensuring that all child and family services – including schools – work in an integrated way to deliver a shared set of outcomes for children. The initiative is universal in that services are expected to work with all children, while the outcomes are seen as desirable for all children. However, there is also an expectation that there will be considerable targeting as services focus on the groups who are at greatest risk of not achieving the outcomes, and then offer intensive support to those who are most
vulnerable. Other interventions target services and institutions that are held to be failing children because of their inadequate practices and leadership. For instance, the ‘National Challenge’ (http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalchallenge/) has been launched targeting those schools with the lowest levels of performance – initially, the 638 secondary schools referred to above. These schools receive intensive scrutiny, but also additional resources and intensive support, on the assumption that these interventions will reduce the gap between their performance and that of other, more successful schools.

In practice, many of these interventions have been particularly intense in the most disadvantaged areas, simply because this is where the children facing greatest difficulties are concentrated. However, other interventions have been explicitly area-based. In particular:

- In 1998, Education Action Zones (EAZs) were introduced (DfEE, 1999). Over a lifespan of five years, they were expected to enable schools and local education authorities in targeted areas to work with a range of community members, and public and private sector organisations, bringing their collective resources to bear on the problems of education in these areas. The EAZs received additional funding from central government, and were expected to leverage additional resources from their partners. The detail of what EAZs would do to address educational disadvantage was a matter for the Zones themselves to decide, but typically they undertook initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and learning, provide students with additional learning support, address issues in non-attendance and poor behaviour, involve parents in their children’s education, and develop links with local businesses.
- The *Excellence in Cities* (EiC) initiative was launched in 1999 (DCSF, no date). It had a tighter focus than EAZs on the internal workings of schools and on a series of centrally-mandated strands that were expected to raise standards – notably, leadership, behaviour and teaching and learning, 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 (particularly through information technology) for local people. At the same time, although there was no formal relaunch of the EAZ programme, it was in practice reshaped so that it focused more clearly on raising standards of achievement (Powley, 2001).

- The *London Challenge* was launched in the capital in 2003, before being extended to other conurbations as the *City Challenge*. Although the City Challenge programmes differs in detail in each of the areas where they are implemented, all are about directing additional resource at urban areas in order to support a programme of school improvement. This takes the form, amongst other things of additional advice for schools, targeted interventions in low-performing schools, strategies for teacher recruitment, retention and training, and encouragement for schools to form support networks.

The rapidity with which these initiatives have succeeded each other, the marked differences between them, and their tendency to change even over their brief life span,
would seem to indicate that there is no single, coherent rationale underpinning all of them. Moreover, although common funding arrangements and a degree of central specification and control lend a certain amount of coherence to each initiative, each also has the characteristics of a more-or-less loosely bundled set of strategies which can themselves be implemented differently in different local circumstances. What they do have in common, however, is the assumption that, because poor educational outcomes are concentrated in particular areas and in the schools that serve those areas, the deployment of extra resource, support and encouragement to those areas should have an impact on outcomes. Whether this is happening in practice is, as we shall now see, a moot point.

3. The impact of area based initiatives
Evidence on the impact of education-focused ABIs is decidedly mixed. Although, in each case, the interventions produce some positive outcomes, impacts tend to be small-scale and to be distributed patchily across different aspects of the ABI and different sites of implementation. Crucially, these seems to be little evidence that ABIs have transformed outcomes in designated areas to the point of equalising outcomes between them and other areas. One recent review, for instance, reaches a gloomy conclusion:

…the evidence to date suggests that ABIs continue to have limited impact and any benefits are, at best, patchy. With reference to education focused ABIs, research on England’s EAZs, for example, shows that relatively few of the programme’s original objectives were realized…Even in terms of attainment targets, there was little measurable improvement and in some EAZs there was even a negative zone effect.

(Rees et al., 2007: 265)
Similarly mixed findings emerge from evaluations of other ABIs. The Government is currently claiming that the London Challenge has had significant positive impacts in raising the average performance of schools in the city and narrowing the gaps between more and less disadvantaged students (DfES, 2007). On the face of it, this seems to promise some equalising of outcomes between London and other areas. However, an independent analysis of outcomes is not yet forthcoming, and evaluation by Ofsted (the national schools inspectorate) suggests that, while London schools may indeed be ‘improving’ more rapidly than schools elsewhere – often from a lower base – the incidence of poor outcomes remains high (Ofsted, 2006). More convincingly, Excellence in Cities has been subject to a substantial evaluation – government commissioned but carried out by an independent research organisation. On the one hand, the evaluators reach some positive conclusions:

…the effect of Excellence in Cities on the educational outcomes considered here suggests that educational policy can have an impact on students in their teenage years; such programmes can be cost-effective; and resource-based policies can show positive results, even when the resources expended are relatively modest.

(Machin et al., 2006: 34)

On the other hand, the evidence suggests that the initiative probably did little to reduce the gap between more and less disadvantaged students in participating schools (Machin et al., 2006; NFER, 2007).
These mixed findings parallel those emerging from evaluations of ABIs in other contexts. For instance, the Zones d’Éducation Prioritaires, operating in France for over 25 years are similar not only in their structures and practices to English EPAs and EAZs, but also in their outcomes. Whilst there is some indication that they may have countered the increase in educational inequalities and that there may have been some impressive local successes, overall they have failed to break the relationship between social disadvantage and poor educational outcomes (Bénabou et al., 2005). Similarly, a recent review of evaluations of different kinds of interventions into both educational and wider social disadvantage concludes that ABIs are no less effective than other kinds of intervention, and that outcomes are often positive, but that, overall, the effects from any kind of intervention are likely to be small (Griggs et al., 2008).

Many explanations can be offered for the failure of ABIs to bring about more significant transformations in social and educational outcomes (see, for instance, Plewis, 1998; Power et al., 2005; Rees et al., 2007). Some of these are to do with relatively superficial features of ABIs – the short life-span of initiatives, the problems of persuading different partners to work together, and the proliferation of ABIs with different structures and objectives, for instance. In principle, at least, these problems might be resolved through more thoughtful and sustained policy-making. However, other explanations point to more fundamental issues with ABIs, and call into question the extent to which ABIs actually do or ever could constitute meaningful attempts to tackle educational disadvantage. It is striking, in particular, how low-geared ABIs are in relation to the issues they are seeking to address. This is evident in their short-term nature, but also in
the limited amount of resource they typically are able to deploy. As Smith, commenting on the EPAs of the 1960s and 1970s argues, ABIs inevitably invite an unfavourable comparison between the ‘puny educational resources’ they deploy, and the ‘major social forces’ they seek to counter (G. Smith, 1987: 33). In the case of EAZs, for instance, the amount of funding dedicated to the initiative amounted to a mere 0.05% of educational expenditure in England (Plewis, 1998), and generally ABIs have delivered an uplift to resources in targeted areas that is small in relation both to overall educational resources in those areas and to the apparent scale of need.

This ‘puniness’ is compounded by the limited scope of most ABIs – and certainly of educational ABIs. Typically, these ABIs are restricted to a limited range of actions aimed at improving the performance of schools and offering additional support to students in those schools. This is most evident in the current City Challenge programme, which is essentially conceptualised as a school improvement initiative, focusing on “Intensive support for underperforming schools”, and “A city-wide leadership strategy led by school leaders for school leaders” (DfES, 2007: 3). In none of the initiatives, however, has there been anything other than the most limited attempt to intervene in what might be regarded as underlying causes of poor educational outcomes – poverty, poor housing, transport and services, limited opportunity structures, or class and other social group cultures.

Finally, the impacts of ABIs are inevitably limited by their being set in a policy framework which pays scant regard to area factors. Standard-based reform in its English incarnation is based on the assumptions that curriculum, assessment measures, pedagogy,
and targets can be specified centrally, without regard to local differences. Meanwhile, policies of school ‘choice’ undermine the link between schools and the areas they serve by offering families the opportunity to send their children to distant schools. As a result, few schools serve single, identifiable localities (Chamberlain et al., 2006). Moreover, a deliberate policy over many years of increasing school autonomy *vis à vis* local authorities means that the incentives for schools to prioritise institutional advantage are often greater than incentives for them to work for the well-being of a particular area. To take an example, the Government is busily establishing a series of privately sponsored ‘academies’ operating within the state system but outside local authority control (see [http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/)). As this programme unfolds, it is becoming clearer that some academies, at least, prosper by reducing the number of disadvantaged students in their population, and by excluding students whose behaviour is troublesome (Curtis et al., 2008). Under these circumstances, the formulation of a co-ordinated approach to educational disadvantage across an area is constantly struggling against the institutional self-interest of largely autonomous schools.

Taking these factors together, some commentators have concluded that ABIs are based on a mistaken – and, perhaps, wilfully mistaken – understanding of the relationship between the presenting problems of disadvantage in an area and the more fundamental causes of those problems. In particular, they charge, ABIs tend to attribute the manifestations of disadvantage in an area to peculiarly local factors and to overlook the extent to which those local manifestations in fact emerge on the basis of socio-structural factors that operate well beyond the confines of the designated area. As Rees et al. argue:
In effect, ABIs are 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. They do not acknowledge that, in reality, local disadvantage is a particular manifestation of the wider social inequalities which are endemic to societies such as the UK. Far from being an exceptional feature of British society, which can be tackled by special state initiatives such as ABIs, areas of social disadvantage are complex, but normal manifestations of the characteristic patterns of social differentiation and inequality in the UK (and elsewhere).

(Rees et al., 2007: 271)

In support of this argument, these critics also point to the tendency of ABIs to pathologise disadvantaged populations, blaming them rather than socio-structural factors for the problems they experience, and to misrepresent the spatial distribution of disadvantage, overlooking the uncomfortable fact that most disadvantaged people live outside targeted areas (Power & Gewirtz, 2001; Power et al., 2005; Rees et al., 2007).

On the basis of this analysis, ABIs cannot be seen as a serious-minded attempt to create a more equitable education system and society. Instead, they demand to be read as a kind of displacement activity, the focus on the presenting problems of designated areas drawing attention away from the inability – or unwillingness – of governments to tackle underlying social inequalities. As Power et al. put it:
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. (Power et al., 2005: 113)

4. Re-thinking ABIs
Although the evidence for the impact of ABIs is disappointing, and the argument that they misunderstand disadvantage is compelling, it is not necessary, we suggest, to reach such gloomy conclusions as these. Despite their historical limitations and failures, ABIs, we wish to argue, continue to have something to offer as a policy tool for tackling disadvantage. Indeed, we wish to go further. ABIs – albeit in a substantially re-thought form – are an essential part of the tool-kit policy-makers need if they are to create more equitable educational systems and to contribute to the creation of more equitable societies.

In order to understand why this is the case, it is necessary to theorise areas and area-based approaches in a somewhat different way from that which is typically employed. Specifically, it is important to begin with the nature of ABIs as *spatial* interventions, embodying assumptions about what ‘areas’ are, how they come to be, and, ultimately, about the relationship between space, place and social life. In a survey of recent thinking
about space and place, Hubbard et al. draw a distinction between two ways of conceptualising space. One is as:

… a neutral container, a blank canvas that is filled by human activity…this absolute or ‘empirico-physical’ conception suggest[s] that space can be conceived as outside human existence; rather than playing an active role in shaping social life, it is regarded as a backdrop against which human behaviour is played out…

(Hubbard et al., 2004: 4)

The other is as “… inherently caught up in social relations, both socially produced and consumed” (ibid: 4-5). This latter view, associated with the work of Castells and, latterly, Massey (Castells, 1977; 1989; Massey, 2005; 2007) amongst many others, is concerned not so much to label and characterise particular places as to understand the social processes through which they are produced and ‘lived’. These processes might, amongst other things, be to do with economic globalisation, or with the working out of the logic of capitalism, or with social power relations, or with the development of individual and group identities.

Such a view has important implications for the way ‘areas’ are understood as the basis of policies for tackling disadvantage. An area is not simply a pre-defined place which can be understood as the sum of its characteristics – its demographics, the quality of its services, the skills and qualifications of its residents, and so on. Rather, it is a site in which a range of social process become manifest and, indeed, which is produced by and reproduces those processes. So, for instance, in our own work, we have been studying education in
three disadvantaged urban areas in the north of England (Ainscow et al., 2007; Ainscow et al., 2008). These areas can readily be characterised in terms of their poor educational outcomes, the variable performance of their schools, and the complex patterns of ethnicity across their populations. However, they also demand to be understood in terms, amongst other things, of the macro-economic processes which drew immigrants into these areas in the 1960s and 1970s, the collapse of manufacturing industry in the 1970s and 1980s which left their residents poor and dislocated, the development of cultural identities which have taken place in different ethnic groups in ways that are both similar and different, the market-led national policies that have left these areas with residualised housing and schools, and the ways in which different groups and individuals inhabit the places where they live and that create both a sense of belonging and boundaries that cannot be crossed. Such understandings show these areas to be not simply the sum of presenting characteristics and problems, but the historical and continuing product of the dynamic interaction of complex social processes. Any attempt to intervene in these areas without such an understanding would seem to run a significant risk of failure.

In a recent analysis of their conceptual underpinnings, Lupton (in press) argues that, judged against more complex understandings such as these, ABIs have tended to operate with an exceedingly thin conceptualisation of ‘area’, and hence of space. In effect, the account of areas on which they are based appears to be simply a set of pathological characteristics whose interactions are loosely specified and where the search for underlying explanations is curtailed. The following, from a recent government report on ‘deprived communities’ is typical:
Every teacher discovers this simple truth in their earliest days in teaching: that children from poor backgrounds do not fare as well in school as the children whose families are comfortably off… [Such children] often live in neighbourhoods characterised by high crime levels, educational underachievement, low skilled, poorly paying jobs and poor health…[where they] face a cultural barrier which is in many ways a bigger barrier than material poverty. It is the cultural barrier of low aspirations and scepticism about education, the feeling that education is by and for other people, and likely to let one down. (DCSF, 2008: 8)

Such a listing of problems and positing of close-to-hand explanations offers ready-made and manageable targets for intervention by policy-makers (Dyson & Raffo, 2007). They lend themselves, in particular, to the sort of multi-strand ABIs described above, where presenting problems can be tackled in parallel. However, they also beg a series of questions. Why do children from poor backgrounds fare less well than their more affluent peers? How, precisely do the high crime levels, poor health and poor jobs of disadvantaged areas translate into poor educational outcomes? How do local cultures develop, how widely shared are they, and how, if at all, can they be changed? Above all, where do these multiple disadvantages come from, and why do they concentrate in the same place? The absence of answers to these questions means that disadvantaged areas appear as unexplained coincidences of problematic features in space, rather than as the spatial products of underlying social processes. We should not be surprised, then, if
intervention tends to be directed towards these features rather than towards the processes out of which they arise.

To this extent, this spatial perspective on ABIs supports the argument that ABIs fail to understand the connections between disadvantage within an area and wider patterns of inequality in society as a whole. However, it does not lead to quite the same conclusions, because the spatial perspective also asserts that place matters. In particular, acknowledging that places need to be understood in relation to macro-level social processes does not mean that places must be seen only as the products of those processes. Doreen Massey, for instance, in a much-cited account, argues for what she calls a ‘global sense of place’. This sense is global in that it rejects the notion of places as having, “boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures” (Massey, 1991: 29), and instead understands how particular places relate to processes that emanate from well beyond themselves. However, a global place in this sense is still a place and cannot be reduced to those macro-level processes:

…none of this denies place nor the importance of the uniqueness of place. The specificity of place is continually reproduced, but it is not a specificity which results from some long, internalised history.

(loc. cit.)

If we apply this argument to disadvantaged areas, it means that while those areas must indeed be understood in relation to patterns of disadvantage across the society as a whole, and to the processes which create those patterns, they must also be understood in relation
to their own uniqueness and the ways in which macro-level processes are mediated by the uniqueness of the local. In our own study of disadvantaged areas (Ainscow et al., 2007; Ainscow et al., 2008), for instance, the macro-social processes we outlined earlier have not produced places that are identical. One of the areas is predominantly white British while the others have predominantly minority ethnic populations. Two are parts of large conurbations with the opportunities that this brings, while the third constitutes a pocket of disadvantage in an otherwise affluent semi-rural county. One has a selective school system at secondary level, whilst the others are non-selective. Such differences could be multiplied many times, and together they mean that the characteristics of these areas, the social dynamics which sustain and change them, and the interventions that are likely to be appropriate within each are different.

Such a view leads to a different set of conclusions about the usefulness of ABIs. By no means all commentators read the research evidence as indicating that ABIs are outright failures or simple displacement activities (see, for instance, Griggs et al., 2008; Joshi, 2001; G. R. Smith, 1999). Such commentators typically acknowledge the limitations of ABIs, but see this as a reason for setting them in the context of progressive mainstream policies rather than for dismissing them out of hand. As Smith puts it:

\[\ldots\text{area targeted programmes are not a panacea and cannot hope to solve everything.}\]  
\[(G. R. Smith, 1999: 49)\]

However:

\[\ldots\text{there is a clear rationale for area targeted interventions. The key reason for this is that some areas suffer disproportionately high levels of economic and social}\]
deprivation; including very high levels of worklessness, poverty, poor health, high crime and fear of crime and need special attention. Although some issues can only be addressed through national level mainstream policies it is the case that some problems occur because of local area related factors and it is therefore appropriate to address them at the local level. \( (\text{loc. cit.}) \)

On this analysis, the problem with ABIs as they have existed in the past is not their area focus \textit{per se}. Rather, it is that they have failed to build coherent interventions on the basis of a proper analysis of how local factors interact with each other and with more macro-level factors operating beyond the designated area. Not surprisingly, therefore, they have generated limited, inappropriately focused, or incoherent interventions of the sort we have described. It is for this reason that Griggs et al., reviewing a range of interventions, bemoan

\[ \ldots \text{the failure of policy designers to articulate a detailed theory of change, namely the mechanisms by which an intervention is predicted to bring about the desired outcomes.} \quad (\text{Griggs et al., 2008}) \]

Likewise, our own study of disadvantaged areas has concluded that interventions have been inadequately conceptualised, and need in future to be based on what we call

‘complex contextual analysis’ (Ainscow et al., 2008) – an understanding not just of what the local situation is, but how it comes to be that way and how, therefore, it might come to be different.
From this perspective, there are some encouraging signs in the English policy landscape currently. For all their centralising tendencies, and all the problems with the ABIs they have launched, New Labour governments have repeatedly committed themselves to the development of local solutions to social problems (see, for instance, Aspden & Birch, 2005; National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, 2000). Local authorities, which at some points in the past have seemed to be a mere hangover from an earlier, less centralised phase of governance, have been allocated a new role as strategic leaders and ‘place shapers’ for the areas they serve (DCLG, 2006; Lyons, 2006). At the same time, mechanisms have been developed which make it possible to formulate genuinely co-ordinated and wide-ranging local strategies for tackling disadvantage. The *Every Child Matters* initiative, for instance, (DfES, 2003), is creating integrated child and family services with shared assessment, decision-making and funding processes, and a common set of aims. The ‘extended schools’ agenda (DfES, 2005b; DCSF, 2007) expects all schools to provide access to students, their families and communities to a wide range of services, and to develop the area partnerships necessary for this purpose. Local Strategic Partnerships ([http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/localstrategicpartnerships/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/localstrategicpartnerships/)) create a forum where local authorities, private, business, community and voluntary sector organisations can plan strategically and co-ordinate their actions for the betterment of the areas they serve.

Although these and many other initiatives are far from problem-free, they nonetheless create a framework within which local strategies can emerge. Some of these strategies address the problems of highly disadvantaged areas in a way which we find creative and
promising for the future. Two of these, where colleagues and ourselves are offering ongoing support through a development and research process, will serve to illustrate what is happening more widely:

- Barnsley is a medium-sized post-industrial town which hit hard times when the mining industry collapsed in the 1980s. It is now in the process of a large-scale physical, economic and social regeneration of the town, aimed at repositioning it as a ‘21st Century market town’. Central to this is an education strategy known as ‘Remaking Learning’ (Barnsley MBC, 2005), which involves transforming school buildings, curriculum and pedagogy, opening schools up for community learning purposes, and linking schools to child, family and community services in the areas they serve. Education is seen as central to the regeneration process, but that process is not restricted to improving the attainments of children at school. Rather, it is concerned with lifelong learning, with developing the skills of the workforce and thus attracting new employment into the town, and with tackling the social problems of the area alongside its educational problems.

- A second example is provided by the New Charter Academy in Ashton-under-Lyne (http://www.newcharteracademy.org.uk/). As we saw previously, academies are privately-sponsored schools which, on the face of it, limit the potential for locally-coordinated approaches to be formulated. However, the New Charter Academy is sponsored by the New Charter Housing Trust, a major provider of social (i.e. subsidised) housing in the area that was spun off some years ago from the local authority’s housing department. The housing trust interprets its responsibilities as
being not simply to provide affordable accommodation, but also to develop sustainable communities in terms of employment opportunities, community safety and cohesion, and the well-being of residents. It sees the Academy as central to this task, offering a means of working directly with children and their families. The newly-founded Academy, therefore, is developing an extensive community strategy, which involves it in offering adult learning activities to local residents, operating as a base for community services, becoming a hub for community activities, and involving its students in community activities. In addition, it is developing a specialism in Business and Enterprise with a view to enhancing the employability skills and raising the expectations of its students. With this in mind, the work of the Academy is nested within local strategies for economic development, and senior leaders in the Academy’s decision-making structure are closely involved with the development and implementation of these strategies.

Examples of this kind, we suggest, offer something more than what critics of New Labour have characterised as the “reconstitution of tried and tested policy responses” (Hulme & Hulme, 2005: 33). They seem to us to be recognisably area-based in that they are addressing local problems through local action in designated areas. However, they also, we suggest, mark an advance on traditional ABIs in three important respects. First, their scope is more appropriate to the task in hand than has been the case previously. Although both of these initiatives involve schools, neither is narrowly focused on presenting problems within those schools. In both cases, the interaction of problems within schools, and the family, community, and area contexts under which children live is
acknowledged. In both cases also, interventions to address this interaction are available, involving a range of community organisations and services, and going well beyond what can be done by schools alone. These initiatives are about reconfiguring major services for strategic purposes rather than simply targeting a small amount of additional funding toward school improvement and student support activities.

Second, the scope and complexity of activities in these initiatives demands and – so far as we can judge – is supported by something like the ‘complex contextual analysis’ we outlined earlier. Indeed, our engagement with these initiatives is structured through the collaborative development of a theory of change aimed at articulating the situation the initiatives seek to address, the outcomes at which they aim, and the steps through which they expect their actions to generate those outcomes. It remains to be seen how searching and sophisticated these theories will be, and how far they will actually guide action amidst the day-to-day pressures of service delivery, but the attempt in itself, we suggest, marks these initiatives out from the under-conceptualised approaches of previous ABIs.

These ‘new style’ ABIs are aided by a relationship to national policy that is different from that of their predecessors. It is, we believe, important that these are locally-driven initiatives within a national enabling framework. Unlike previous ABIs, they are not designed by policy-makers remote from the issues they are seeking to address. There is therefore a stronger chance (to put it no more strongly) that these initiatives will be more fully thought-through than the loosely bundled interventions that have characterised centrally-driven ABIs. It is also important, however, that they arise within the context of
the enabling policy framework we outlined above. It may well be that mainstream British government policy fails to support these initiatives through a sufficiently strong commitment to social and educational equity. Nonetheless, the welfarist tradition and the commitment to social justice, however compromised in recent decades, die hard in British politics and continue to form an important strand in New Labour thinking in particular.

5. Some broader implications
In this paper we have, as befits the writing brief we were given, focused on some specifics of the education scene in England. We have identified the spatial distribution of social and educational outcomes in our country, described and critiqued the ABIs that have been a characteristic feature of English policy for some time, and described some initiatives that seem to us to offer a promising ways forward. In so doing, however, we have touched, however briefly, on questions of the relationship between social and educational disadvantage, and on the spatial distribution of these disadvantages in a way that, we believe, will have resonance in many other countries. It is to the broader implications of this paper that we now wish to turn.

First, we make no apology for made only limited reference to ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive education’ until this late point in our paper. Whilst it is probably true that the discourse of inclusion tends to be used internationally in relation to learners who are identified as disabled or in need of special education, it in fact has its roots in multiple concerns for social and educational justice, some of which are only loosely related to one another
(Clough, 2000; Dyson, 1999). In England, where the special needs education system embraces many learners who are not identified as disabled, there is a tendency for inclusion to be used broadly, and to signal concerns for all forms of marginalisation within the education system (see, for instance, Booth & Ainscow, 2002). From this perspective, it seems to us that the fate of learners who fare badly in the education system for reasons that are somehow related to their social background is unequivocally an issue in inclusive education.

The implication of this, however, is that inclusion has to be understood in relation to broad issues of social inequity, and that the development of inclusive education must necessarily involve action to create more equitable societies as well as more equitable schools. The new kinds of ABI we outline above, therefore, are significant not just as improved ways of securing better educational outcomes. They also point to the possibility of – and need for – ways of aligning action within schools and the education system with broader social action. Moreover, they imply that such alignment might involve some radical rethinking of how education systems relate to other aspects of public activity and, more specifically, of how schools might be different as they become part of integrated socio-educational approaches.

We also believe that the issue of ‘the area’, though presented here in specifically English terms, is common to most – probably all – education systems and, indeed, societies. In every country, resources, opportunities, capabilities and outcomes are distributed spatially. That distribution will be very different in different places. England does not
have the vast rural interiors or exploding urban slums of some economically poorer countries. Neither does it have the affluent rural hinterland and sharply divided big cities of the USA. Complex contextual analyses – and the policy responses which spring from them – have to be resolutely local; they cannot rely on generalisations about ‘globalisation’ or ‘the logic of late capitalist economies’, however useful such generalisations may be as sensitising and explanatory frameworks.

Finally, we believe that our paper has implications for the nature of research in which scholars of inclusive education might engage. For understandable reasons, much research in inclusive education focuses on school processes and education policies. However, a serious concern with the relationship between and spatial distribution of social and educational disadvantage demands studies that do not treat schools and education systems as hermetically sealed entities. The complex contextual analyses that, we argue, should form the bases of interventions are also, we suggest, proper activities for researchers to undertake. At the same time, the tradition of activism within inclusive education research suggests that researchers should engage not only with the understanding of ‘areas’, but also in the formulation of interventions to create more equitable outcomes in those areas. We, therefore, premise our own work on a model of ‘development and research’ (http://www.education.manchester.ac.uk/research/centres/cee/process/) and actively seek to become involved with policy-makers and other local actors as they formulate their strategies. In turn, this implies that inclusion researchers have to be prepared to become involved in evaluating these strategies – including evaluating their outcomes. When, some years ago, one of us undertook a review of the research literature on inclusive
schools, it was striking how much effort went into documenting school practices and cultures, and the opinions of teachers and school leaders – yet how little effort went into identifying whether any of these made any difference to the learners on whose behalf the schools claimed to be working (Dyson et al., 2002; 2004). Yet the true test of inclusive education is, presumably, not whether schools and education professionals change, but whether life is in any meaningful way, better for children and young people.

References


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