

Pupils, the forgotten partners in education action zones

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Education action zones (EAZs) involving local partnerships are one of the government's policies set up to help raise standards in pupils' performance and behaviour in areas of economic and social disadvantage. This article explores the nature of these partnerships and the fact that pupils are excluded. It reviews literature on student voice and describes interviews with 139 Year 8 pupils in two inner city zone schools to gain an insight into their perceptions about their learning. The data highlights some differences by gender and ethnicity and also the steps pupils believe are necessary if improvements are to be made. If zone schools are to live up to the promise of 'empowering people and communities', the paper argues pupils need to be included as stakeholders who shape the implementation of policy and become part of the solution to the difficulties EAZs are charged to address. The paper concludes by suggesting this will require a shift in the dominant epistemology to recognize pupils as co-constructors of learning and a shift towards more democratic forms of relations in order to encourage pupil participation and enable their voices to be heard.

Keywords: Education action zones; Pupil voice; Participatory pedagogy; Peopling policy; Co-constructing learning; Democratic forms

Context

From a period of centralized control over education policy, there has been an observable shift towards education initiatives which have sought the direct involvement of local communities. Such initiatives can be seen in the Department for Education and Employment's publications, *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997) and *Meeting the Challenge* (DfEE, 1998), which refer to partnerships with parents and the local community as a means to help improve standards in schools.

In this paper, we discuss one of these policies, Education Action Zones (EAZs), focused on disadvantaged areas. We begin by providing a description of their

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establishment, purpose, and composition, and in so doing note the absence of pupils' involvement within the policy discourse of these new partnerships. We then refer to literature on pupil 'voice' which helped inform a case study undertaken with secondary school students and zone members and point to the potential of EAZs as democratic fora to involve and recognize pupils as active subjects in policy implementation and as part of the solution to low attainment.

The establishment of education action zones

Zones were first established in 1997 and comprised clusters of schools within a specific geographical area together with local communities of interest or partnerships. They included head teachers, school governors, businesses, the community, parents, and the LEA. Through membership of an Education Action Forum (EAF), the local statutory decision making body, these partners from the public, private, and voluntary sectors, together with a member appointed by the DFEE, developed action plans and targets to improve standards and behaviour. The ends for zones were, therefore, firmly outcomes focused and centrally controlled, but what was different was the recognition of community, public services, and business as key contributors to the realization of their goals. Their composition and constitution has been seen by Power and Whitty (1999) to embody a new democratic form, as conceived in Giddens' (1998) third way and also to accord with Putnam's (1993) theory of social capital.

To achieve their aims, zones were encouraged to find 'radical and innovative solutions' (Blair, 1999, p. 1) to problems of under-achievement. To facilitate this, they were exempt from some of the requirements on other state-maintained schools. They were, however, required to set targets and report annually to the DfEE on the progress made by pupils in relation to the National Curriculum statutory assessments. Arguably, therefore, zone schools, despite the possibility for greater self-determinacy, were, in return and as a condition of recurrent funding, subject to stringent accountability measures and close external scrutiny. The fact that their success was to be measured by national assessments, which Broadfoot (2001) suggests reinforce traditionalist conceptions of teaching and learning, could be seen to vitiate against the very innovations with which they had been charged. Gerwitz (1999, p. 156) too has seen the imperative of target setting as likely to impede 'authentic innovation'.

The exclusion/inclusion of student voice

Whilst EAZs have been depicted as embodying a new democratic form, the fostering of such a form within zone schools was not integral to their brief and, as Power *et al.* (2003) have reported, few zones have made any explicit commitment to involve students in their Action Forums.

Nevertheless, over the past decade there has been a move towards greater involvement by pupils in decisions about aspects of school life, and such a stance has been given legitimacy through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In reality though this has remained far from common practice and this absence of

pupil voice is apparent in much of the literature on school improvement, even though Fullan, over a decade ago, hinted at the possibilities within his question ‘What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?’ (Fullan, 1991, p. 170).

Within the area of pastoral education and special educational needs there have, however, been a number of enquiries which have sought pupils’ views on, for example, behaviour policies (Gersch *et al.*, 1996), on discipline (Garner, 1992), and on rewards and punishments (Harrop & Holmes, 1993). There have also been a number of broad ranging enquiries into students’ views of school such as those by Keys and Fernandes (1993), Barber (1994), and Rudduck *et al.* (1996), but a detailed focus on issues about teaching and learning has been less apparent and, in Fielding’s (2001, p. 101) view, remained largely a forbidden area.

Where such enquiries have been undertaken, as in the work of Rudduck and Flutter (2000), Mitra (2001, 2002), Macbeath *et al.* (2001), and Laidlaw (1994), and through the UK ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) Network Project—*Consulting Pupils About Teaching and Learning*—benefits have been signalled. These have included a greater understanding about pupils’ perspectives of being learners and how this can be used to inform strategies to enhance pupils’ efforts and attainment and to influence classroom and school cultures. Charlton and David (1997) too have been convinced of the benefits and have suggested these include a reduction in pupils’ personal problems and an enhancement in pupils’ self-esteem and motivation. Providing pupils with the opportunity to consider their own learning and, in so doing, develop their own thinking about how they learn, has also been seen to make students ‘inclined to take more responsibility for their education because it is no longer something being done to them but something they do’ (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 10).

Against this backdrop of studies which recognized the significance of listening to pupils’ voices and within the context of the new democratic form on which EAZs were premised, we developed our own enquiry to see what could be learnt from pupils with a view to informing practice and raising attainment. At the outset of the study, the zone knew nothing about students’ views on how they believed they learnt, and what strategies they believed might be useful in helping them learn and in enhancing their motivation.

The research

The research was conceived as the first stage of an action enquiry and was designed and carried out by university staff working with learning mentors, parent co-ordinators, inclusion workers, and other staff from the zone in an inner city area. It took the view that these groups’ own practical learning could be enhanced through active participation in the research process. As participants, it was envisaged that all those involved would acquire new skills and knowledge, thereby building capacity within the zone, enabling them better to conceive policies and practices to help raise attainment.

The decision to focus the research on pupils’ perspectives was unfamiliar to zone members and evoked a degree of conflict between the partners. There was, for

example, conflict rooted in different notions of teacher professionalism and constructs of the pupil. One parent, who had received her own education in the Caribbean, believed as qualified and trained professionals, teachers in the zone schools ought to know about appropriate pedagogy rather than have to consult pupils. She, therefore, regarded the 'need' for the research into pupils' views on learning, as confirming her view that pupils were not achieving because teachers were insufficiently qualified. For her, the research was a diversion away from tackling the real issue, the need for better teachers with strong role boundaries between teachers and taught.

Another zone worker supported the proposal to gain a better understanding of students' views but questioned whether the views would be acted upon, particularly if these were critical of schools and teachers and challenged current ways of working. She was aware that issues of power and authority were being opened up. Furthermore, she was concerned that pupils' expectations would be raised and she was anxious about her own credibility in the community if there was no subsequent action. For her, being a Forum member and included in a new form of community politics raised new questions of accountability.

Those involved in the research from the university foresaw other difficulties. They knew the findings were unpredictable, might be seen as threatening by some teachers, and that some might dismiss the approach on the grounds that pupils lacked experience and knowledge of what they as professionals knew to be in pupils' interests. They, therefore, recognized the potential radicalism of allowing pupils a voice, but felt that the data should not be treated as a direct mandate for action but rather to help inform understanding and dialogue between teachers, pupils, and parents about future practice. At another level, that of process, they were concerned that involving zone staff, unfamiliar with research design and data collection, could increase problems of reliability and validity. Although keen to demystify the research process and build capacity in the zone, the reality raised fundamental questions of democratic participation, control, and questioning of areas of expertise.

Methodology

The research methodology was designed by the research team with EAZ partners and discussed with and agreed by the zone director and the head teachers of the two schools, who took responsibility for consultation with teachers and parents of the year groups involved. A semi-structured questionnaire was chosen as the primary research tool in order to capture the voices of students, as well as to provide quantitative data to highlight any measurable trends within the schools as well as across the student body.

The questionnaire was purposely designed to take into account the age and experience of the students and was intended to be 'fun' to complete, in that it contained a range of different types of questions and activities. It was tested with students as part of a small pilot. The final version contained questions about learning in the core curriculum, since it was these subjects on which the zone was judged, and generically

focused questions on learning, as well as questions designed to discover what motivated students to want to learn. The focus was broad and included learning both at school and home and asked students to identify ways to enhance their learning. It was designed to be completed on a one-to-one basis between the interviewer and the student, to avoid students influencing or being influenced by their peers and to enable the less articulate to be heard. We wanted to avoid the problem discussed by Silva (2001) of some students representing others and the possible exclusion of those whose interests are frequently 'least-served'.

Whilst the university team's preference was for these interviews to be taped to enable the richness of the data to be captured and as a reliability check, this was resisted by the majority of those involved in the data collection. The view of the learning mentors and inclusion workers, in particular, was that the students and their parents would be less willing to co-operate in the research, as students' anonymity was less likely to be protected and this was important if students were to be open, honest, and their responses authentic. Additionally, they believed that tape-recorded interviews were associated with negative experiences of authority for some students and their families and, hence, the students might feel suspicious about the process and be guarded about what they chose to disclose. The university research team took cognisance of this and agreed that students' responses be written onto the questionnaire during the interview so that these were transparent to them.

The decision was made to interview half of the year 8 pupils in the zone's two secondary schools (139 pupils), a sample large enough to reflect the gender and ethnic make-up of the year cohort. The gender and ethnic breakdown of the final sample was compared with the full cohort population profile and adjusted to ensure the accuracy of the sample. Black and minority ethnic students made up 48% of the full year 8 cohort, but were slightly over sampled in the survey to include a proportion of 55%. Black and minority ethnic students made up a higher proportion of the year cohort at school F (60%) than at school G (47%). There was some debate as to whether only black and minority ethnic pupils should be interviewed, but the final agreement was that all ethnic groups should be included. Year 8 was chosen as it was felt that this would enable the data to be used to inform subsequent practice and with sufficient time to enhance learning prior to key stage tests and examinations at the end of the compulsory years of schooling.

The interviewing was carried out during the school day and within a 3-week period to ensure that no major factors would affect responses or accentuate any school differences. The questionnaire responses were then coded and analysed. Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis and coded where appropriate.

In addition to the collection of data from the pupils, data were also collected from the other participants in the research, i.e., parent co-coordinators, inclusion workers, and zone staff who had conducted the interviews with pupils. This took the form of a questionnaire following the completion of the interviews and also a focus group discussion. This was to ascertain what new understandings the various partners had gained through participation in the research which could be looked at alongside the data from the pupils and could help inform future policies and practice to raise attainment.

Findings: what did pupils tell us

Within the confines of this paper, we draw on some of the findings to illustrate some of the ways in which pupils perceived they learnt in order to gain an understanding of what their learning needs might be and, hence, the steps that could be taken in response. We also focus on data which highlights pupils' acceptance of their own role and responsibilities as learners as well as the responsibilities they saw as the schools, since we started from the premise that having a voice fore-grounded rights but was also balanced by responsibilities.

Given the external pressure on the zone to meet targets and increase pupils' performance in the core curriculum subjects, our interviews with pupils began by focusing on their views about learning in English, mathematics, or science. Each pupil was asked to describe and evaluate their experience of a recent lesson in one of these subjects. The most popular choice of subject in both schools was science, chosen by 43% of all pupils followed by mathematics (32%) and English (25%).

When analysed by ethnic group, white students showed a marked preference for talking about science, whilst black and minority ethnic students showed a slightly higher preference for mathematics. English was the least popular choice by all groups, chosen by only 24% of white and 26% of black and minority ethnic pupils and chosen by only 21% of boys.

To discover more about these pupils' attitudes to learning, they were asked why they had chosen to talk about the particular subject. Most had selected the subject because it was their favourite or the one they liked best. The second most common reason was the content and activities in the lesson, and these were cited as the most important factors enabling them to learn.

Of interest is the extent to which the responses to the core subjects and the low ranking of English is reflected in the pattern of GCSE results of the year 11 pupils in the two schools, suggesting that there may well be a relationship between pupils' early disposition towards these subjects and their subsequent attainment. Studies (Collier, 1995) have shown competence in language and literacy as key elements in academic achievement and, hence, the low ranking of English has ramifications for students' achievements in other subjects.

When asked to select from a range of activities those which helped them to learn, listening and discussing were thought to be the best means of learning. There was, though, a wide spread of opinion, with students seeing different learning activities as appropriate for different subjects and many pointed to practical experiments as effective:

Practical work—is easier to learn hands-on than copying from a book.

Practical experiments which are fun and stick in your head.

The fact that listening and discussion were ranked highly was re-enforced in their responses to a question on the organization of learning in all subjects. Working in a group chosen by themselves or as part of a pair were much preferred to working as part of the whole class, working alone, or part of the group chosen by the teacher. Amongst the reasons given were the sharing of ideas and skills:

I learn best when debating and having different views from others.

In a group you understand more and share ideas.

Students' preference for developing their understanding through dialogue with peers may well be because pupils felt safer, more able to draw on their own and local community knowledge, and were able to have more control over the content of the lesson.

These findings have some similarities to those of Keys *et al.* (1995), who found the learning preferences of year 7 and 9 pupils to be heavily weighted towards working with friends and being able to talk through ideas. Macbeath *et al.* (2001) also found that pupils enjoyed working with their friends, but found that pupils were also able to recognize those who could aid their learning in specific ways.

In contrast to learning in friendship groups, for the year 8 pupils in our two schools, learning in the whole class, a strategy increasingly advocated in government policy, was seen by many to be a problem:

If you don't understand something in the whole class, you can't ask cos it's embarrassing.

None of the students referred to how they felt their learning was advanced through discussions between themselves and the teacher, through sharing ideas in conversations (Ochs, 1982) where thinking skills can be developed. Rather, the students in this study expressed negative statements about their experiences of whole class learning, seeing it as marred by disruptive behaviour.

In a whole class people mess around more.

Their concern about the conditions for their learning was strongly voiced when they were asked specifically to think about anything which got in the way and stopped them learning. A large majority of students (80%) cited bad behaviour of others as a key factor. The following quotes mirror those of young people cited by Barber (1997) and drawn from Keele University's Successful Schools research database. The quotes provide an overview of the comments made by a large number of the year 8 pupils in our study:

When other people shout out and don't pay attention it takes my mind off the teacher.

When students arrive late and disrupt the class.

If people are running around or playing and distract me, then I join in.

People interrupting and not listening so the teacher has to say things twice.

Among the other responses, 17% of students mentioned that their friends sometimes stopped them from learning and a similar number (16%) said that personal feelings affected how they learnt, indicating a conscious awareness about their own learning.

Other students (13%) saw the problem to be not of their own making, but a consequence of the amount of work the teacher expected of them and a similar number mentioned teaching methods as a barrier:

If the teacher doesn't explain [the work] properly.

Sometimes the teacher sets large amounts of work and we can't get through it all.

Some teachers expect too much, and others think I am not bright and don't give me much.

What is not clear from the data is whether pupils saw any relationship between inappropriate teacher expectations or inadequacy in their explanations as precipitating disruptive behaviour by others or themselves. When, however, they were asked if they thought there was anything different the school could do to help them learn, almost three quarters of those interviewed (74%) believed there was. The students again referred to behaviour and expressed strong views about class discipline indicating that they felt it was the school's responsibility to 'sort out' disruptive students. These exemplify the tenor of their responses:

Split difficult kids up.

Exclude people that disturb the class.

Separate the kids that are distracting.

Although curriculum content and activities were thought to be important, it was the teachers' ability to control the class that was seen to be crucial. Given the ethnic composition of the schools, these responses reflect Delpit's (1997, pp. 588, 589) view that 'Black children expect an authority figure to act with authority' and 'must consistently prove the characteristics that give her authority'.

A significant number and virtually the same proportions from both white (19%) and black and minority ethnic groups (18%) were, nevertheless, aware that whether or not they learnt was to an extent dependent on their own personal efforts. There were differences by gender, with 20% of girls referring to this compared to 17% of boys.

When asked 'Is there anything more you think you could do to help yourself learn?', 86% felt that they themselves could do something. They volunteered that they could talk less, listen more, and do more homework, or all of these. Black and minority ethnic students responded more positively and constructively than white students. Among the actions they proposed were the following statements:

Pay attention, open my brain. Watch and listen more to teacher.

Not follow the gang around. They're bunking and I don't want to.

Try harder and get more sleep.

I could spend more time over my work and not get distracted.

Not let other people disturb me and respect the teacher.

There was, therefore, recognition of a shared responsibility, that of the teacher for establishing conditions conducive to learning and, complementing this, an enhancement in their own disposition to learn by modifying their behaviour and the nature of their interactions with the teacher and their peers. What is interesting is that the number of pupils who had identified responsibility and actions residing solely with the teacher was exceeded by those who accepted some responsibility for their own learning and were able to suggest actions they could take to enable improvements to be made.

We were, therefore, interested to know what made students want to learn or encouraged them to learn. Their responses to an open-ended question were broken

down into six discernible categories: future prospects; content of lessons; teachers; self motivation; friends; family.

The factor most frequently cited, irrespective of gender or ethnicity, was future prospects. Thirty-eight per cent of boys compared to 25% of girls mentioned this, as did 36% of white compared with 30% of pupils from black and minority ethnic groups.

Good job, lots of money—live in a house, not the streets.

My brother, he did really well and got As. He has the perfect life and I want to be like that.

It's worth learning when you are young—you have the advantage. You can get a good job and a nice car.

Although the numbers are too small to be statistically significant there were some differences between black and minority ethnic groups, with future prospects being the factor for 83% of Black African pupils.

Given that the largest number of responses was about future prospects as a key to their motivation for learning, it is not surprising that, when asked if they knew what they wanted to do on leaving school, the vast majority of students (80%) had a relatively clear idea. Analysing gender and ethnicity together, the data revealed that black and minority ethnic males and white females were more likely to cite a profession than their counterparts, and it was white male students who had the lowest aspirations. Overall, students' responses reflected a wide range of interests and career aspirations and they identified further help and support they believed the school could give to foster a closer relationship between school work and their intended future pathway. They were keen to have work experience, summer schools, after school clubs, and more information about jobs and the qualifications they needed.

To close the interview, students were asked if they had got anything out of the interview. Almost three quarters (74%) said they had, most indicating they had enjoyed being able to express their feelings with the knowledge that they were being listened to and heard:

It's good to know some adults take on what children say—they should do it more often.

For some, it made them think about their future and, for others, it had given them an opportunity to reflect on and identify their own views about their learning needs and to offer ways forward. Students' positive responses to the interviews helped confirm the importance of dialogue as a means for teachers and zone staff to hear students' perspectives about their learning and their perceived solutions to their learning needs.

Conclusion

The research provided the opportunity to move beyond the communities of interest originally conceived for EAZs and to include within these interests those of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Whilst zones have been charged with being innovative, there is little evidence of innovation at the level of understanding pupils' own perceived learning needs and the more democratic form of schooling that listening to their needs would require. Our research provides a rich source of evidence derived from students' experiences in a particular context of disadvantage and allows us to learn what they value, what they want to accomplish and be accomplished. We see their inclusion as partners to be a fuller realization of the promise of zones to 'empower people and communities' through 'engaging local people in the development and delivery of policies' (Blunkett, 1999, p. 1). Through recourse to students' voices and looking at learning as perceived by them, opens up the possibility of making policies informed by them, owned by them, and more likely to be supported by them in crucial areas such as behaviour and modes of learning. It allows us also to recognize in what aspects ethnicity and gender may be significant and in which aspects practices might, through negotiation, be differentiated.

As this is the first stage in the enquiry, we are not in a position to know whether, in meeting some or all of the needs expressed by students, the zone would then re-engage those most disaffected from learning, or whether behaviour management by both staff and students would improve, that levels of interest and achievement in literacy would increase, and that learning would take place in a context of listening. The extent to which pupils become more involved in learning processes, more committed to learning, and whether they perceive staff creating environments more conducive to learning would need to be monitored.

We are, however, mindful of Nieto's (1994, p. 398) caveat of needing to keep in perspective pupils' ideas not as 'the final and conclusive word on how schools need to change', but that we move beyond much current practice and recognize pupils' social maturity and experience by giving them responsibilities and opportunities to share decision making (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, p. 86).

As Cook-Sather (2002, p. 8) has argued, at a minimum teachers should be 'willing to negotiate' with pupils in response to their expressed needs and include them in the list of stakeholders who can help shape education policy and practice. Drawing on the ideas of Prunty (1985, p. 136), we want to argue that students should not be 'a means to an end' in meeting targets, 'but treated as ends in their own right' able to give a materiality to policy and be recognized as key participants in the process of democratic education reform. It is they who 'people' (Ball, 1997, p. 270) EAZ policy and, as suggested by the research, are part of the solution to raising standards and patterns of behaviour. This necessarily calls into question policies conceived to raise standards, but which are largely enacted upon and independently of those whose active engagement is central to their success.

Whilst this research has focused on schools within an EAZ, it has raised issues which are worthy of wider consideration at a time when surveying pupil and student opinion is being increasingly advocated across all sectors of education (DfES, 2003; OfSTED, 2003). These models tend to position the student as a consumer, with rights to a quality of educational service for which teachers alone are held accountable. By contrast, the model emerging from this enquiry suggests the need to go beyond students' rights to express a view about their learning, but additionally to

recognize, within a new democratic form, that students also have responsibilities. They can, in collaboration with their teachers, become co-constructors of their learning, with the capacity to co-enquire into their learning in order to progress it. What then becomes important is the creation of a climate in which students become aware and can, through dialogue and negotiation with their teachers, learn and be enabled to exercise responsibility, to move forward their learning, to achieve goals that are meaningful to them and which motivate them.

If our desire is to make schools places where students want and are able to learn, with a view to maximizing attainment and raising standards, then, as Cook-Sather (2002) has argued, these new participatory forms will be essential. If realized, they would provide evidence of more democratic modes and also give a reality to innovative practice, which Power *et al.* (2003) believe are currently absent from the majority of zones. For this to be accomplished will, we believe, involve both a shift in the dominant epistemology and in power relations.

Such a reality may be achievable given the Government's recent articulation, through its Minister for Schools (Miliband, 2003), of a commitment to social democratic values which it sees as necessary to progressive social reform. Such a pedagogy, whilst respecting 'the craft and science of teaching', promises to move the pupil to 'centre stage'. Is this a move to include pupils as partners in the conception and implementation of policy?

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