

Can France give Education Action Zones new life?

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Schools are essentially expected to provide all students with the same educational opportunity despite where they live, or their ability levels. Education Action Zones (EAZs) and Zones d'Education Prioritaire (ZEPs) have been implemented to help eradicate the issue of student equity, promising innovation and a solution to inequalities evidenced in society and the school system. This policy looks to reduce inequalities and improve educational achievement in areas of disadvantage by nurturing partnerships, not only with parents, but also with the community, broader society, and other educators. The French government is rejuvenating ZEPs as a solution to recent urban unrest in Paris, packaging old wine in new skin. Yet to be determined is whether the zone concept will help to deliver improvements in recent social issues in France.

Key words: Education Action Zone (EAZ), Zones d'Education Prioritaire (ZEP), Social Inequity, Student achievement, Partnership, and Innovation.

Policy makers are constantly faced with turbulence, as exemplified by current political disillusionment in England and political power balance changes in the U.S. However, the eyes of the world have more recently been focused on France, due to the 2006 summer riots in Paris. While this problem crosses ethnic boundaries, it also appears to be generational and urban specific. Alarming incidences of violence and crime, particularly in urban areas, lead observers to speculate on the growing anarchy among urban youth. Despite the fact that the Paris region is one of the most heavily policed metropolitan cities in the world, crime and delinquency continue to rise. New York City, with its 7.5 million residents, has 37,000 police officers. While Paris, with its approximately 2 million residents, has 75,000 (CRS, 2007).

Individuals and schools do not function in social and economic vacuums, and though society has high expectations for its youth, this is not always sufficient. In both England and France, socioeconomic and family background factors have been shown to be important influences upon student's educational achievement at all stages of education (OECD, 1996). Educational leaders have a moral responsibility to create schools that prepare all students to be intelligent and thoughtful citizens who are able to make wise, ethical decisions (Storey and Beeman, 2006).

Whereas in the US and England disparate occurrences of youth unrest tends to occur nationwide, in France it is specifically an urban problem with occurrences predominantly in Paris. To understand why, it is important to have an understanding of French post-war urbanization policies. In the 1950s, lower socio-economic groups were concentrated in the suburban rings around major cities. While the tourist may see only the wide stone boulevards and gracious buildings, any deviation from the beaten track would soon lead to large, post-

war urban public housing developments inhabited by concentrations of people who have suffered decades of high unemployment. Consequently, there exists a generation of youth in France whose immigrant parents have not worked or who have had little contact with the world of work. These young adults tend to be concentrated in the housing projects with little hope of future employment; they are restricted to a life style of limited mobility, having few contacts outside their immediate environment due to their limited financial and human capital resources.

In addressing the issue of educational opportunity, social disadvantage, and inequality the educational systems of England and France have evolved different approaches (Osborn, Broadfoot, Planel, and Pollard, 1997). Government and society in France profess the ideals of equal opportunity and equal rights under the law. It has been morally unacceptable to treat students differentially (OECD, 1996). Schools were expected to provide the same curriculum and pedagogy to all students regardless of who they were, where they lived or their ability levels (Sharpe, 1992). Thus vast economic inequalities in society were replicated in schooling. Ideologically, great emphasis was placed on the goals of equal opportunity, reduction of inequality, preparation for citizenship, and secularity. This emphasis on the "public good" aspects of education was enforced by strong centralization and a pre-eminent role for the state in educational decision-making and control (Osborn et al., 1997).

Unlike France where the education system has developed on constitutional principles, resulting in a unified system of provision, the English education system has been strongly influenced by both the church and voluntary agencies. Religious education and concern with the personal and social development of the individual has always formed part of the remittance of schools. This interest in the development of the individual was reflected in policy at both the local and national level.

Thus, there appeared to be a disparity of goals within the two education systems resulting in significant differences in the beliefs and teaching methods adopted by teachers working in areas of disadvantage within the two countries. In neither country had there been an adopted approach substantially affected by the strong linkages among social class, educational achievement, and life chances (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Halsey et al., 1980, Chariot et al., 1992). In both countries schools were generally seen to be reproducing the social conditions evidenced in the wider society.

History of Zone Policy

Not surprisingly, there have been many attempts to address this problem. While the issues of unemployment, inadequate health care, poor housing, families in crisis, and racial prejudice all have an impact upon young people in schools, they are in no way restricted to one particular country. To meet these challenges policy makers, practitioners, and consumers of education looked to the successful experiences of other countries for guidance and advice.

It would seem that the French had seen little to impress them as the government was resurrecting and rejuvenating education policy known as special "zones" through the enhancement of Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire (Zones for Educational Priorities or ZEPs) as the much needed and immediate solution to their problem of urban unrest.

Interestingly, it was a British politician, Sir Geoffrey Howe, (Senior Minister in Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, 1979 to 1990) who first advocated the idea of enterprise zones (later implemented by President Clinton in the United States). Sir Geoffrey argued for a radically different approach to social and educational policy in areas of disadvantage:

“A far better policy would be to remove as much government as possible, from a number of small areas, in the most derelict and depressed sections of England's cities. Within these enterprise zones, occupying perhaps a square mile or so, taxes and government regulation would be virtually eliminated to create the most attractive possible environment for free enterprises to flourish.” (Butler, 1991)

The conceptual premise was that entrepreneurs, freed from regulatory and tax burdens, would find distressed urban areas attractive investment opportunities. The government hoped that private enterprise would be more successful than government development programs in generating economic activity in derelict urban areas.

The foundation on which Howe developed his vision was an earlier British policy, Area Based Initiatives (ABI) implemented between 1964-1975, which focused on external community factors. The Education Priority Areas (EPA) program, established after the publication of the Plowden report (1967), was the first foray into positive student discrimination, diverting extra resources to schools in the most deprived areas. According to Silver and Silver (1991), the creation of EPAs was the first real parallel in England to US research and policy, linking poverty and education:

The EPA decisions and projects which followed drew at least partly (as did the Plowden committee itself) on American experience. Community action, inner city and other projects in the late 1960s and 1970s, together with the various projects aimed at compensatory (or what the EPA national project preferred to call 'complementary') education, gave the appearance of formulating, after a time lag of half a decade or more, British versions of established American practices (p.3).

An evaluation report of the EPA program chaired by David Halsey in 1972 concluded that the EPA program should continue as the means of implementing positive discrimination in education, and that pre-schooling was the most effective and economical means of raising standards in deprived areas. Halsey was firmly of the opinion that the EPA should be part of a wider movement for community development and social justice.

Critics of the EPAs, Barnes and Lucas (1975) complained that there was no good reason to treat priority area schools any differently from other schools. “For every two disadvantaged children who are in EPA schools five are outside them.” The reasons for poor school performance, they argued, had to be tackled at its roots through child welfare services and anti-poverty measures or through educational means addressed in all schools.

By the mid-1980s, EPAs had all but disappeared (Smith, 1987) and the focus for promoting educational achievement shifted away from the external circumstances experienced by schools and towards their internal attributes; in particular, the focus was on how schools were to be managed and made more accountable. The devolution of school budgets together with open enrolment and the publication of student attainment data were

intended to provide the necessary impetus to drive up student achievement in all schools (Power, Whitty, Gerwitz, Halpin, and Dickson, 2002).

Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire

Despite concerns in England regarding the policy of “positive discrimination,” similar conceptual models were being crafted and implemented in France (Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire: ZEPs), and in the United States (Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Communities: EZs and ECs) with the specific aim of directing additional resources to public schools serving the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Education Action Zones in France and England were viewed as the required catalyst for energizing social change, and providing new opportunities for social mobility.

In both France and England, the education system had been highly competitive based on high stakes examinations to determine rigid career trajectory. In 1981 the new French Socialist President Mitterrand introduced ZEPs in an attempt to level the playing field in relation to student equity and opportunity by ensuring that zone schools had low student-to-staff ratios and that teachers were given financial rewards if they taught in a ZEP school.

ZEPs were revised and re-launched in 1990 and 1998 respectively, but the essence of the policy remained unchanged: to reduce inequalities and improve educational achievement in areas of deprivation through strengthening school links with parents, opening the school to the locality, and creating conditions for effective partnerships, such as high schools, feeder elementary schools, and pre-schools together in one zone. The priority given to ZEPs in terms of resource allocation has developed markedly over the years. As in England, the French model places emphasis on local partnerships, resources and power as a means for delivering and raising educational standards.

The evolution of ZEPs resulted from leaders' perceptions that though comprehensive schools (*collège unique*) democratized access to secondary education they did not break the link between attainment and socio-economic status. The French government recognized that by ensuring uniformity they had, in fact, fostered inequality. ZEPs addresses the need for local differentiation of provision, and therefore, decentralization of power:

“You can't manage diversity and heterogeneity by means of national circulars published in Paris in the offices of the minister of education. The logic of diversity combines here with that of efficiency: both demand that power is delegated to the periphery that recognition is given to a zone of autonomy of the actors, to those who confront daily concrete problems, in concrete situations. (Charlot 1994:41)

The core of ZEP policy was that social justice necessitated responsiveness to local needs. The re-launch in 1997 required all zones to have an action plan, a *projet de zone*, based on approved targets which served as a contract between the zone and the schools. Each contract was zone specific and evaluated in terms of progress in academic achievement measured by national tests taken by most students at eight and eleven years old.

Education Action Zones

British Prime Minister Tony Blair took office in 1997 after promoting the ideology of 'New Labour'. Education Action Zones (EAZ) were promoted and legislated within the Schools Standards and Framework Act of 1998. Zone policy was innovative and unique in that it would give schools in areas of deprivation the opportunity of raising standards through raising funds from the private sector. Between 1998 and 2000, seventy three EAZs were created, selected through a bidding process funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and located within Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Funding from the DfES and sponsorship arrangements from the private sector were possible throughout the five year period of the zoning. The emphasis was on tackling zone problems in partnership with schools, parents, businesses, and local agencies.

EAZ policy extended the EPA approach of targeting additional resources to disadvantaged areas by emphasizing the need for all service deliveries, whether public or private, to work in partnership with local communities. Prior to announcing the EAZ policy, the Secretary of State said:

Government.....cannot succeed alone. It must work in partnership with all those who have a part to play in improving the quality of education: parents, teachers and governors, local authorities, churches and business (Office of Standards in Education, 1997).

The program reached the end of its statutory lifespan in December 2003.

Major organizational, management and leadership differences can be seen with the French policy. An EAZ is set up as a result of a centralized decision, which selects a team having presented a strong project that is likely to mobilize local efforts. Successful EAZ bids are then awarded additional financial resources that are managed at the local level although they are held highly accountable by the Department of Education. ZEPs are nationally managed by the School Teaching Division (DESCO) at the Ministry of Education who make common management indicators (ICoTEP) available to actors in the field. There are now ten times as many ZEPs as there were EAZs.

Lessons Learned

In France ZEPs are again being seen by the government as the solution to problems of social justice in urban areas, specifically in Paris. Disseminating power to stakeholders in the system, rather than hoarding and centralizing power, was seen as a strategy for avoiding current urban conflicts that were suppressed punitively and authoritatively. The collective unification of previous individual antagonism, disillusionment, and apathy emerged in coercive and explosive forms. "Violence in schools and neighborhoods provide a contemporary example. Feeling powerless, seeing society as an enemy, young people try to empower themselves through gangs and guns. People who feel genuinely powerful will find options that are more productive. When a highly centralized system begins to loosen up, the initial outcomes are often surprising and disturbing. Previously hidden conflicts leap to the surface. Interest groups battle for scarce resources" (Bolman and Deal, 2001, p.114).

But according to education officials, while additional monies were welcomed, communities in both England and France initially resisted the “education zone” label because they were afraid it would “ghettoize” neighborhoods. The concept of treating any one group in a different way is counter-indicative of French values.

The rationale for ZEPs arose out of the apparent failure of the traditional comprehensive model to address equity and equality issues. Academic attainment in areas of social disadvantage remained consistently low. Similarly, in England, there was a growing awareness among the major political parties that financial resources alone do not guarantee positive educational outcomes for all students. In “Excellence in Schools” (Office of Standards in Education, 1997), the Labour government’s first major policy document, the Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, said that one of the government’s main targets was to “eliminate, and never excuse, under-achievement in the most deprived parts of our country.”

In both countries there was an acknowledgement that many schools in areas of disadvantage had only a tenuous hold over the achievement culture and that the quality of both leadership, teaching, and learning in these schools needed to be addressed to meet the needs of the diverse communities they were serving. There was also a political acceptance that current policies were failing to make any impact on these areas and that an innovative approach was required that was divergent from the traditional model for the delivery of schooling.

Revamped ZEPs have now become the centerpiece of the French Government’s efforts to reduce the inequities that exist among their youth, particularly in urban areas. They are seen as the government’s opportunity to reconstitute and strengthen the nation’s failing public school system. Additional funding will be provided based on the needs of students to attract and retain qualified teachers, provide libraries and computers, and lower large class sizes. Increased funding, it is argued, can provide better teachers and other inputs with the hope that this will yield better student performance.

When Michael Barber launched the EAZ program at the North of England Conference in January 1998, he referred to plans in the United States with which companies such as Arthur Andersen and Procter and Gamble run schools. However, he made no reference to any evaluation of these initiatives; neither did he mention Zones d’Education Prioritaire, despite the fact that France is a partner in the European Union.

The tie of a common language seems to override the fact that France and England are tied into a common European educational policy as a result of the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht. Article 149 of the European single Act stipulates that “the Community contributes to the development of an education of quality.” At the time of the Summit of Lisbon, 2000, the European Council asked the Council of Ministers for Education “to undertake a general reflection on the future concrete objectives of the educational systems, centered on the common concerns and priorities.” (Commission of the European Communities, 2001). After a discussion involving all member states, the Commission published a “strategic text” at the end of January, 2001, containing “the future concrete objectives of the education system” (Commission des Communautéennes, 2001). The governing ideology of this common educational policy is that European teaching must help Europe to “become the most competitive dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.” This was the first

document that outlined a comprehensive and consistent approach for national policies on education in the context of the European Union.

Innovation

Three common key elements of Education Action Zones evidenced in both England and France were innovation, partnership, and raising student attainment. In the discussion of these elements, data are drawn from a review of available articles and reports relating to action zones both nationally and internationally. These sources were supplemented by material derived from the author's research in England (semi-structured interviews conducted with three EAZ directors and their personnel plus additional interviews with a Local Education Authority (LEA) Director, Head teachers, business leaders, community members, and parents).

In England, EAZs were innovative in that they were a form of decentralization. Policymakers anticipated that the mix of decision makers within EAZs (which included previously excluded groups) would challenge long held assumptions regarding school organization and community relations which would lead to experiments with innovative instructional strategies. However, a weakness to the sustainability of the EAZ program was its attempt at innovation which threatened influential "players" or vested interests. The unions felt threatened because EAZs had the power to change teachers' pay and conditions if they so chose. The LEAs felt threatened because the funding and direction of the EAZ skipped them and undermined their position within the education system, while Headteachers felt threatened because EAZs had the authority to seize governance control at their school. As Crowson and Boyd (1998) point out, when "differing professional cultures and incentive systems are thrown together...space and 'turf' must be renegotiated" and this causes frictions.

In February 2001, the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) inspected the first six zones in England. The report stated,

Zones are making a useful contribution to raising standards in schools though they are not all doing so consistently. Activities tend to be stronger in primary schools than secondary schools.....There has not been the amount of innovative work that was originally expected (Office of Standards in Education, 2001).

The report concluded that instead of bringing new ideas and fresh practices, EAZs had built on national and local initiatives already in place. While some had promoted "useful developments," they had not been "test beds for genuinely innovative action" (Office of Standards in Education, 2001). In pursuing the spirit of innovation, zones were criticized for having excessive and over-ambitious programs of activities that failed to focus specifically or radically enough on their local contexts. Innovation was frequently not matched by rigor in planning, evaluation, and dissemination. Further, the report referred to early zone management as weak. Several months after this early evaluation report, Stephen Timms, the New Labour Schools Minister, announced that EAZs were to be phased out either at the end of their initial three year period or at the end of their statutory five year period and transformed into Excellence Clusters.

In 2003, OfSTED produced a final report evaluating the management and impact of EAZs. They said of the EAZ program,

“Overall, despite some innovative activities, strong working relationships and improved management, EAZ programs have had only partial and mixed success.....There have been a number of striking individual successes. However, the effect of the initiatives has generally not matched the ambitions set out in zone plans and has been modest in terms of effect on attainment.” (Office of Standards in Education, 2003)

Although the EAZ program promised innovation and attainment, as a practical matter it consisted of new people packaging old wine in new bottles.

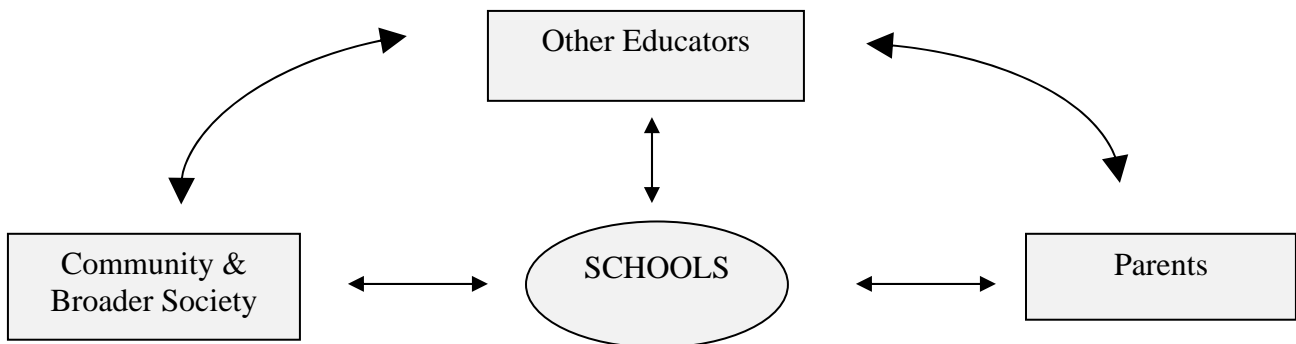
Partnership

The idea of partnership implying community participation and community development was central to current policy development at every level, from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, through to local government and community sector associations. In November 2000, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) held a conference on “Schooling for Tomorrow.” The conference concluded by listing the twelve key elements of the future school as a learning organization. They included:

Networks and partnerships are critical: School autonomy goes hand-in-hand with being connected to the community, other educators, and the broader society...Too much education practice in OECD countries is characterised by isolation: schools from parents and the community and from each other; teachers and learners in isolated classrooms. Partners may address skills and employment, society and culture, or bring together different parts of the educational world; parents are among the most important of schools’ partners. (OECD, 1996)

New Labour presented partnership as the embodiment of the EAZ program (See Figure 1), building the local community to ensure a commonality of understanding and delivery.

Figure 1. Productive School Network and Partnerships



The key role of partnership: Partnerships are fundamental to schooling ...they open new opportunities and knowledge; they provide the critical links between schools and their communities; they broaden the support base on which dynamic schools and teacher professionalism depends.” (Johansson, 2000)

The promotion of partnership is markedly pragmatic in form and the Government’s commitment to it is flexible and open.

“We will find out what works, and we will support the successes and stop the failures. We will back anyone, from multinational company to a community association, if they can deliver the goods..... We will, in short, govern in a different way.” (Blair, 1997)

Eliminating the line between “public” and “private” and fostering the growth of “partnership” are at the heart of New Labour’s vision for government. Partnerships in education typically involve the public, private (for profit), and voluntary (not-for profit) sectors essentially as providers, parents, students and the community as participants. In an effort to underscore the importance of a partnership approach in the delivery of educational services in the EAZ, the Action Forum comprised the various stakeholders in the partnership and was formally independent from both the government and the LEA, whereas in the ZEP model the organizational form of the partnership differed significantly. Their decision making structure of educational professionals excluded lay partners from involvement in the steering committee and of any influence in either the management structure or policy decisions.

Table 1. An Example of Action Forum Membership in Salford and Trafford, U.K.

#	Affiliation	#	Affiliation
18	Representative from each School Governing Body	3	Community and Voluntary Sector Representation
2	Representative of the Secretary of State	1	Representative from local University
4	Representative(s) from the Local Authority (ies)	2	Education and Business Partnership Representation
4	Representative from the Private Sector Business	1	Representative from local Health Authority
2	Representative from local Training Enterprise Council	2	Representative from Further Education Sector
1	Representative from Careers Partnership	2	Representatives from Religious Denominations
2	Parent Representatives	1	Representative from the Probation Service
2	Teachers’ Union Representatives	1	Representative from the Council for Community Relations

Source: Eccles EAZ Newsletter, 1998.

In the English EAZ there was lay representation on the Action Forum (See Table 1), but parents were outnumbered by “experts.” Gamarnikow and Green (1999) concluded that hearing the voice of parents was pivotal to strategy and planning. This was even more a weakness with ZEPs where there was no formal parental voice:

“The filtering out of participants operates sometimes to the detriment of the *associations* (local community organizations) and more generally to the detriment of local inhabitants.

Attainment

Both EAZs and ZEPs aimed at mobilizing all the resources within the zone to contribute in raising the standard of achievement in zone schools. Pedagogically, both EAZs and ZEPs allowed greater curriculum autonomy and flexibility. Educators and their partners in the EAZs and ZEPs were encouraged to innovate both in terms of pedagogical content and delivery. In addition, governments gave both programs external targets to address. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) identified five specific strands for all zones to address: early years, inclusion, literacy, numeracy, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Within these strands were numerous smaller, grassroots initiatives which addressed in greater detail and more specifically the government strands. To achieve this target it was anticipated that social exclusion would be reduced; the quality of teaching, learning, and leadership would improve; and students and families would receive increased support as a result of a partnership approach from all constituents within the zone.

ZEPs were also given the target of addressing early year’s education. The programs they introduced are similar in some ways to the U.S. government’s Title I program for disadvantaged students. Evaluation studies have shown that when children from disadvantaged homes entered the *écoles maternelles* (mother schools) earlier (at age 2 instead of 3) they were more likely to perform at a higher level in elementary school.

The effect of EAZ initiatives on raising achievement was variable. In both France and England the strategy seemed more effective in the early years of education, being strongest in the primary school. In the secondary schools programs promoting inclusion and tackling disaffection were generally perceived as more successful than those that have focused on raised attainment.

Conclusion

Not surprisingly national contexts influenced zone development. EAZ’s in England were intended to be “the test-bed for the school system of the next century,” according to School Standards Minister, Stephen Byers (TES, 1998). They would be encouraged to experiment with such things as the length of the school day and year, teachers’ pay and work conditions and the school curriculum. Though challenged to be innovative no zone wanted to fail and so many zone directors abandoned ambitious programs in favor of tried and tested programs.

The British government publicly legislated a limited statutory life of five years for EAZs to specifically encourage innovation and to ensure programs were mainstreamed into standard practice within zone schools. From the EAZ viewpoint, this was a detrimental restriction as it directly impacted zone initiatives; evidence of improved school and student achievement was expected to be almost instantaneous. The Government appeared impatient

for evidence that innovative zone programs were impacting decades and generations of cyclical decline.

Theoretically a partnership could ultimately contribute to the overall capacity of a zone by adding expertise, knowledge, and experience. It is also the case that those involved should be willing participants. In England, the emphasis on partnership was enforced by the necessity to acquire sponsorship in order to access matched finance from the government. In France, the situation was very different; the introduction of ZEPs meant a new settlement at both the local and the national level. In both France and England partnerships were encouraged to reduce the isolation of specific schools and their students.

EAZs were constructed as a new form of local governance, while ZEPs were an integral part of the existing administrative structure of the French school system. LEAs, Unions, and Headteachers in England initially felt threatened by the program and conducted an active media campaign which frequently emphasized what they perceived as negative aspects of the program.

Zone evaluations in England and France tended to be inconclusive and policy implications remain unclear. Distinguishing between the effects of zone programs, economic incentives, educational initiatives, and local characteristics means that zone evaluation is a difficult and complex issue. A consistent international conclusion is that no two zones are the same. Zones vary depending on the economic, cultural, and social forces at work in the regional and national contexts. A report conducted by Power, Whitty, Gerwitz, Halpin & Dickson (2000) for the Institute of Education, found that English EAZs had a limited and inconsistent effect on test results. Analysis indicated that some zone schools had actually done worse than similar schools outside zones.

The common purpose of EAZ policy in both England and France was to fight against learning failures and social inequalities, while emphasizing local actors, partnerships, and resources. The policy had a limited life span in England due to the fact that though there was extensive investment “the government’s improvement targets for schools in disadvantaged communities or “challenging contexts” proved to be elusive (Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris, and James, 2006). Nevertheless, the policy was sustained and reinvented in France, endeavoring to reduce the impact of social disadvantage in schooling through a combination of three strands: innovation, partnership, and improved strategies for delivering the curriculum.

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