

OBSTRUCTING THE HIGHWAY: RESISTING EAZS in HACKNEY

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In July 1999, Education Secretary David Blunkett spoke to the Confederation of British Industry. He told them that the comprehensive system was a tainted legacy. He called for teachers to abandon a "dogmatic attachment to mixed ability teaching" and reaffirmed his commitment to specialist technology, arts and sports colleges. [*Times Educational Supplement* 23 July 1999, p.6]. On the same day that Blunkett was talking to the CBI, there was a meeting in my school. It was a meeting about the Education Action Zone that has been proposed for Hackney, East London. (1) The meeting was not a consultation meeting. The governors had already made the decision that my school should be in the Zone. But it was the first time that parents had had a chance to say to governors what they thought about this. The meeting was very well attended — by school students and teachers as well as by parents. It was also representative, in the sense that the main ethnic minority communities which the schools serves were present — and vocally so — in the hall that night. There were African and African-Caribbean parents, Turkish and Kurdish parents, white parents. And they were united in their opposition to the EAZ. Most of those present had come direct from the Town Hall, where they had been lobbying councillors going into an education committee meeting that would receive a progress report on the Zone.

The students and their parents turned the governors' meeting into a consultation meeting by their refusal to accept the governors' right to make decisions without consulting them. They were angry. And they were angry because they had a clear sense of what the "tainted legacy" of comprehensive education represented for them.

They were angry about other things as well. The mother of a boy in Year 8 explained very calmly to the parent governor who had voted for the Zone that she expected the parent governors to reflect the feelings of parents — to represent their views on the governing body. The father of a girl in Year 9 talked about his experiences as a railworker, about the effect of privatisation on the rail service as a whole — the effect on the people who used the service and the effect on those who worked in it. And he made the connection with what the Zone represented. But what shone through all the contributions was a sense that, for all the deficiencies of the current system, the comprehensive school which their children attended was something that was worth defending — and that it was necessary to defend it because of the threat posed by the Zone.

At the end of the meeting, I had a conversation with another parent, a man whose daughter was in Year 9 and whose son, who had just finished his GCSEs, had been in my Year 11 tutor group. He said that he had always been a bit suspicious of teachers, middle-class outsiders coming into a working class area, but that he had changed his mind because of the campaign against the EAZ. He was enthusiastic about the meeting, about the whole campaign, because it showed how teachers and parents could fight together for what was right. He also talked about his daughter, about the importance of Drama for her because of the confidence it gave her, about the extent to which learning was a social activity, about the importance of a perspective on education which took account of the different needs of different children, and about his perception that the school had been successful in maintaining such a vision, rather than being sucked into a narrow preoccupation with tests and league tables. He was highly sceptical, too, about the Zone's claims to increase the employability of Hackney students; but I'll come back to this point.

For him, as for the other people in the hall that night, the "tainted legacy" of comprehensive education does not seem to be something to sneer at.

The City to the rescue?

I have started in the middle of the story. The parents' meeting at my school and Blunkett's address to the CBI reflect two different accounts of the comprehensive system. Blunkett's is a continuation of the dominant theme of New Labour in government, of a piece with the analysis of the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997). The parents' meeting, though, is a reflection of another way of seeing what comprehensive schools are doing, an indication of the potential for defending the gains which have been made by and through the comprehensive system. I would want to argue that the meeting also represents another (and more plausible) version of accountability than any offered by successive governments in the past two decades.

The story starts, though, back in May 1999, when the Department for Education and Employment announced the details of the 47 EAZ bids which had been shortlisted for the second round of Action Zone development. The Hackney bid, which went under the name of the "Kingsland Highway EAZ", had, I suspect, hardly been read up to this point. I managed to get hold of a copy from the local NUT office. My headteacher said that she thought she might have seen a copy, but she wasn't sure when or where her copy might be. The governing body had made the decision to allow the school's name to be included in the Zone at a meeting in March when at most three governors, including the head, had even had sight of a copy of the bid document. In other schools, from what I have heard, there was an even less formal decision-making process: the school's name was included in the bid to the DfEE on the basis of a decision by the Chair of Governors – or even because the headteacher had rung up the LEA to ask for more information about the EAZ.

Such beginnings matter not so much for what they reveal about a particular stage in the process than for what they suggest about a democratic deficit which was to characterise the whole process of consultation on the EAZ. From the very first, the Hackney EAZ was based on a clear notion of partnership. The point was made in the graphic that graced the front cover of the bid document. This took the form of a map of Hackney and the City of London, the financial capital of Britain. Linking the two areas was a broad two-way arrow. The Action Zone was to be a bridge between Hackney schools and the City. The main partner in the Zone was to be the Corporation of London, the only elected authority in Britain where voting rights are related to property ownership. The aim of the EAZ was to focus on improving the employability of Hackney school leavers:

“The Zone will work with businesses on developing and delivering aspects of the curriculum, with a priority focus on competences for employability.” (Hackney 1999, p.15) (2)

The document made a point of the geographical proximity of the City, while repeating the New Labour mantra about the relationship between educational attainment and economic performance:

“The city is clearly visible at the end of Kingsland Road and the vision is the Kingsland Highway Education Action Zone opening up the opportunities in the City and the rest of London to Hackney children and young people. Economic regeneration should be driven by

sharply rising educational standards. Confidence, self-esteem, high aspirations and good educational standards will open up employment opportunities for Hackney's young people in local business and in the City and the rest of London.” (Hackney 1999, p.3)

As the Institute for Public Policy Research economist Peter Robinson has pointed out, there is no evidence for even a simple correlation between educational standards and economic performance within developed economies; and what the Zone document is proposing is something much tighter than a mere correlation. What it suggests is that "sharply rising standards" will be the cause which has the direct effect of bringing economic regeneration to this very deprived borough.

Encoded within this model are not just some untested and fairly tendentious assumptions about how poverty can be tackled but also some very questionable assertions about where the responsibility lies for the existence of social deprivation. What has held back the people of Hackney is, it would seem, a series of subjective factors, located within the people themselves. If only Hackney school leavers had higher aspirations, if only they looked up and saw the City at the end of Kingsland Road, then all their troubles would be at an end. Such an analysis leaves no room for any messier, more complex factors, no room for any hint of structural inequalities and exclusions. Not a whisper, say, of racism as an explanation for the differentially high level of Black or Turkish/Kurdish youth unemployment:

“Our vision rests on a conviction that higher standards can be achieved only if the adult community, and especially parents, are fully engaged in supporting their children's education and improving their own.” (Hackney 1999, p.3)

So it is the parents who are responsible. By not supporting their children's education, they have consigned them to replicating in their own lives the economic failure that blighted their parents' lives. What an insult! No mere deficit model, this — but a clear attempt to blame working class parents for a system which reproduces inequality.

What the EAZ bid had to say on the subject of partnership helped to reinforce this point. Not only the Corporation of London but also the Metropolitan Police were to be part of the charmed circle. Few parents in Hackney would seem to have a particularly rosy view of the relationship between the police and the community. Nor was it clear why the cops should be spending their time designing school curricula, when such large doubts hung over their ability to fulfil their core functions in a way that met with the consent and approval of the wider community. Equally significant, though, is who is left out of this notion of partnership. The area around my school — the area that was at the centre of the EAZ as originally conceived — is one in which there are a large number of actually existing community organisations — African-Caribbean, Turkish/Kurdish, and many others. A significant number of these organisations have a specific and explicit interest in education. But in every version of the EAZ proposals that Hackney has produced so far — and there have been at least five drafts — there has only been one mention of one organisation that could in any sense be seen as representative of a particular ethnic minority community.

A new curriculum?

The solution which the EAZ proposal offers is a confused and confusing one. It talks of "higher standards", and it announces that "key Zone innovations will include ... a strong

emphasis on curriculum innovation from age three to sixteen. At Key Stages 1 - 4 the National Curriculum will be disapplied." Such a suggestion could be genuinely radical. The critique of the National Curriculum as fundamentally flawed is as old as the National Curriculum itself. There is a compelling argument that it is, in central and defining ways, ethnocentric, racist and exclusive, that it marginalises other cultures, other traditions, and in so doing marginalises many of the students whom we teach. (See, for instance, the many articles published in *Socialist Teacher* between 1988 and 1998.) The curriculum has, furthermore, been increasingly defined and more narrowly circumscribed by a kind of twin-track policing approach: on the one hand, Ofsted's interpretation of good practice and on the other the redefinition of what is taught by what can be tested — the SATs, baseline assessments, CATs, and the imposition of terminal examinations as the hurdle which must be cleared for accreditation through public examination at 16, via GCSEs.

In such a context, then, it might be empowering for students to be freed from the constraints of the National Curriculum, for teachers, parents, community groups and school students to enter into dialogue about the construction of an alternative curriculum, or rather of alternative curricula. But this was not quite what the authors of the Hackney EAZ bid had in mind. What their bid goes on to say is this:

Whilst maintaining a clear focus on developing literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, as key skills, disapplication will create the space for new and distinctive approaches to learning ... Disapplication of the National Curriculum will enable Zone schools to focus on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy scientific and ICT skills, thus paying particular attention to the needs of boys, EAL (English as an Additional Language) pupils and underachieving ethnic minority groups." [Hackney 1999 pp. 4, 13]

One long-term problem with the National Curriculum, that it tended to emphasise what was tested, has led to an over-emphasis on the core subjects of English, Maths, and Science - especially the first two of these; this has been exacerbated by the present government's version of "back to basics", enshrined in the one true way of the literacy and numeracy hours. In this context, the EAZ proposals mark an even clearer separation of the core — redefined as key skills but looking ever more like basic skills — from any other form of curricular entitlement. "New and distinctive approaches to learning" sound good and fine — but when the business community (whatever that is) is making the decisions, one might be permitted to wonder what kind of decisions they might be. Likewise, one might wonder how the authors of the bid came to decide that the learning needs of such diverse categories of students as boys, EAL students and 'underachieving ethnic minority groups' would best be served by an unrelenting diet of basic skills training?

The interesting thing about the bid document — and why it repays such analysis — is that it renders explicit many of the presuppositions of much of current education policy. However tempting it might be to dismiss this as merely a piece of Hackney lunacy, it is uncomfortably close to what now constitutes the mainstream. Commenting on the results achieved by Hackney students over the past four years, the document notes the underlying trend of rising achievement, but: "... the rate is too slow and is subject to considerable year on year fluctuation. Analysis indicates that this is due to inconsistency of attainment in the core subjects at GCSE, a situation which must be addressed so that pupils' achievement is improved." [Hackney 1999, pp. 8-9] Life would be fine if such abuse of statistics were a rarity. But the context for such nonsense is a national situation where the Secretary of State

for Education has promised to eat his hat if the average standard for 11-year-olds is not reached by 80 per cent of eleven-year-olds.

So let's just straighten out a few of these statements. The GCSE results are subject to fluctuation. That is because different sixteen year olds take the GCSEs in different years. The fluctuation is "due to inconsistency" in the core subjects in the sense that only the core subjects can possibly be compared year on year, since these are the only subjects studied by most of each sixteen-year-old cohort. What the document is saying then, is that fluctuation is due to fluctuation. Now I have nothing against tautologies. They can be very cheering. But there is a problem when they are used as the foundation stone on which to construct an extremely dangerous edifice. Boys, bilingual learners and other "underachieving" ethnic minority groups are to be made to spend more of their time getting back to basics because they have done less well than other categories of student. No truck here with silly liberal nonsense about affective factors, about students' motivation — and certainly no hint of the notion of an entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.

This Gradgrind curriculum is to be leavened by nothing more substantial than "guarantees of specific experiences: residential, music and performing arts, sports, and museum visits." Much as I would welcome such specific experiences, and much as I would welcome the funding that would allow schools such as mine to provide more such experiences for all our students, it is hard to see how such trips could function as an adequate surrogate for Music, Art, History, Drama and Physical Education, for example, as specific — regular? timetabled? — curricular experiences.

The EAZ proposals, then as submitted to and approved by the DfEE, were coherent in their analysis of the problem and in the solution proposed. The line could be summed up as follows. Hackney school students are not getting jobs because they are not achieving high enough standards. This is happening because they have low expectations, they are not supported by their parents, and their teachers are not up to the job either. To sort this out we will bring in businesses to help organise the curriculum, and we will concentrate on a basic skills approach. Again, it is tempting to treat the Hackney experience as an aberration. Actually, though, it's not. The NUT announced recently the success of its strategy to render harmless the EAZ initiative. Businesses had not taken over. Zones were being led by local education authorities. As Corporal Jones used to say in *Dad's Army*, "Don't panic!" Meanwhile, the NUT's own EAZ unit has compiled data on what is happening in the 25 existing Zones. In 19 of the 25, there have been significant changes to the curriculum. And the changes that have been made prefigure the Hackney approach. In the Brighton Zone, there are changes to the National Curriculum at all key stages. In Thetford, there is now apparently the "Thetford Curriculum". In the East Middlesbrough EAZ, all students are to focus on literacy, numeracy and IT (see NUT, 1998).

Campaigning

When the NUT group in my school found out about the content of Hackney's EAZ proposals, in the last week of May, we went on the offensive. We took the issue to a meeting of the Staff Association. Out of a teaching staff of just over 50, there are 40 NUT members. Right from the start of the campaign, we were determined to achieve the greatest degree of unity that we could. The Staff Association decided to leaflet parents, informing them of what was being proposed and seeking. To show the strength of feeling amongst the staff, we couched this leaflet in the form of an open letter to parents and carers, signed by over forty-five staff,

teaching and support. And — in a move which in itself sharply differentiated our approach from that of the Zone's supporters — we translated the leaflet in to Turkish, the main community language. The leaflet focused on the EAZ's threat to a broad and balanced curriculum, and on the kinds of partnership which the Zone appeared to encouraged (with business and the cops) and the kinds of partners who were apparently not to be considered (teachers, parents, community groups). Over a dozen teachers — including the representative of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (least militant of the three major teaching unions) and several other ATL members — distributed the leaflet at the gates at the end of school. My school has a long and honourable tradition of leafleting in this way, but usually it is the same old faces at the gates. It was clear that the fact that there were different teachers there — as well as many more of us than usual — had an impact on the school students, and increased the chance that the letters would get home.

Through the local branch of the NUT, we also became involved in planning and building support for a public meeting, to be held at the school in the middle of June. On Saturday mornings we leafleted in the two local shopping centres. The meeting was very impressive. Over two hundred and fifty people turned out. Bernard Regan, of the NUT Executive, and Mike Rosen, poet, broadcaster and Hackney resident, spoke from the platform. A teacher from the neighbouring borough of Newham spoke about the experiences of those schools in Newham which were already in an Action Zone. Parents, governors, local councillors, teachers, school students and community activists also spoke. There was a shared perspective that the EAZ was something imposed from outside, without consultation with any of those most affected by it, and that a campaign needed to be waged against it.

When our own school governors met to consider the Zone proposals, twenty-two members of staff turned up as observers at the meeting. Four of us spoke as representatives of the Staff Association. And then, after we had all been asked to leave so that a private vote could be taken, the governors decided, by 5 votes to 3, to stay in the Zone. The numbers are significant: many parents and teachers involved in the campaign have been outraged by the sheer unrepresentativeness of the decision-making process — by so few people making decision which affect so many, and in the teeth of the declared opposition of the many. Those who have sought to push the Zone through have resorted to the usual smear tactics. The campaign against the Zone was, a journalist on the *Times Educational Supplement* suggested to me, the work of a handful of teachers in the Socialist Workers' Party. Well, no. Not when ATL members stand at the school gates distributing our leaflets, and not when there are no teachers in my school who are members of the SWP. (There are a couple of parents who are in the SWP — but somehow that doesn't fit the cliché quite so well. And in any case, they have been behaving like, well, concerned parents — like all the other parents who have been active in this campaign.) What has been striking to those of us who have been involved in other campaigns over the years is just how broad-based, just how representative, this campaign has been.

Students and teachers

After the governors' decision, the Staff Association met again. We agreed to rebut the letter to parents from the Vice Chair of Governors with one of our own. With the title "Seven Lies about the Action Zone," this one had even more staff signatures than the first. Again we gave it out at the gates — this time with a Bengali translation as well as a Turkish one. The students, meanwhile, had started to become restless. After all, it was their education that was at stake in all this. The letters and leaflets which they carried home were about them. In

the last week of term, on the day of the education committee, over two hundred school students staged a walk-out from my school. At half past two, they seized the tannoy, made an announcement that the school was closed for the day. They marched into the busy road in front of the school, blocked the traffic, handed out leaflets of their own to the passing motorists, dealt admirably with the arrival of the cops, stood their ground, controlled the more unruly elements — and only dispersed forty minutes later when they felt they had made their point.

I know that it is hard for some (such as the diary writer on the *TES*) to appreciate this, but these Hackney students were clear what they were doing. They knew what their protest was about. Not for them Blunkett's notion of the comprehensive system as a tainted legacy, not for them the replacement of a broad and balanced curriculum with the divisive mechanisms and funding inequalities of the specialist schools: what they wanted — and what the students still want — is the education to which they are all entitled, free of the tainted interests of business. Theirs is a conception of education far too generous to fit within Grandgrind's straitjacket of basic skills.

And what of the teachers' part in all this? The National Union of Teachers has accepted that the school group's request for action, first made in June, is in line with union policy. At least one other school, a primary also unlucky enough to be within the proposed Zone, has voted overwhelmingly in favour of taking action. But we have yet to hear if a ballot really is to be sanctioned.

Eleven other schools have pulled out of the Zone. Those that remain in have been augmented by others, largely drawn from the part of the borough with the largest middle class population. There is no geographical coherence to the Zone as it is currently constituted, no sense in which it addresses specific disadvantage, no sense in which it can be said to present a strategic answer to the problems which all Hackney's schools face.

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NOTES

- (1) Education Action Zones (EAZs) are the centrepiece of the Labour government's strategy for the reform of urban education. They involve business partnership, curriculum change, and an erosion of the role of elected Local Education Authorities. (STA 1998)
- (2) All quotations from are from the version of the EAZ proposal that was submitted to the DfEE and approved by the DfEE in May 1999. As the campaign against the EAZ gained momentum, the proposals were constantly redrafted: five different versions appeared within the space of a few weeks. The redrafting process seemed designed to remove any words to which the anti-EAZ campaign had drawn attention. The substance of the proposals does not seem to me to have been altered at all.

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