

‘Educational Renovation’: Analysing the relationship between education policy and urban renewal in Islandton, London

Kalervo Gulson
School of Education
Australian Centre for Educational Studies
Macquarie University
Sydney Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on two case studies in two ‘transnational’ cities, Sydney and London, with a focus on ‘Islandton’ in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. It will use an analysis of interview data from a range of educational administrators, school principals, and community workers, to explore educational policy developments that target ‘*crisis* populations’ in an area of urban disadvantage. This area is also undergoing processes of urban renewal.

It is argued that central government policy of ‘Excellence in Cities’ resulting in the creation of educational priority zones in this disadvantaged urban area has been reinterpreted and applied by those working with, ‘*crisis* populations’. It is proposed that the result is the practice of what is termed ‘educational renovation’.

Subsequently, the concept of ‘educational renovation’ is tentatively applied as an analytical tool to explore the spatial relationships between schools and areas undergoing urban renewal. This concept is premised on the suggestion that educational policy change in areas of urban renewal has ramifications for both schools and the areas surrounding the schools.

This paper is based on two case studies in two ‘transnational’ cities, Sydney and London. Smith (2001) argues that ‘transnational urbanism’ is a spatial concept allowing for the capturing of ‘a sense of the wide range of possibilities for social change we usually associate with urban life’ (p. 5). In this instance the social change is a Blair government education policy initiative in the disadvantaged area of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. This paper focuses on one strand of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) program, an EiC Action Zone in Islandton (pseudonym).

The paper explores the positioning of ‘*crisis* populations’ in Tower Hamlets and Islandton, areas subject to processes of urban renewal. ‘Crisis populations’ are seen as an integral part of policy contingencies relating to urban renewal and education in Islandton. Using the notion of ‘policy refraction’ (S. Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997) this analysis outlines how the EiC policy is mediated by local concerns that are mutually constitutive with national issues, such as raising educational standards in targeted areas, and transnational issues like global migration (Smith, 2001). This mediation is depicted as ‘educational renovation’, a concept that will be used as an analytical tool to explore the spatial relationships of educational change in Islandton.

Very few studies have taken space into account when looking at education policy or sociology (Shilling, 1991; Taylor, 2002). Nonetheless, Richardson and Jensen (2003) assert that the spatiality of social life can be read using a ‘cultural sociology of space’ (p.8). Therefore, my spatial reading of educational policy is premised on physical space hosting many other forms of space.

Spaces, then, may be constructed in different ways by different people, through power struggles and conflicts of interest. This idea that spaces are socially constructed, and that many spaces may co-exist within the same physical space is an important one. It suggests the need to analyse how discourses and strategies of inclusion and exclusion are connected with particular spaces (Flyvberg & Richardson, 1998: 9-10 cited in Richardson and Jensen, 2003: 7)

The notion of 'educational renovation' explicitly acknowledges the spatial aspects of educational policy in Islandton. I would like to suggest that the 'crisis population' in Islandton are educationally and socially disadvantaged by the circumstances of their 'everyday' lives in a way that raises equity aspects concerning the degree to which opportunities are distributed unevenly across urban areas. The 'crisis population' can be contrasted with what Gerwitz, Ball and Bowe (1995) note as the opportunity (and, thus, I would add, relative mobility) of the middle classes to access education markets. As Robson and Butler (2001) argue, the fields of consumption, employment, housing *and education* constitute middle class formation. Thus, the middle classes gain positional advantage through their spatial mobility while the 'crisis populations' have limited opportunities due to a lack of mobility.

This analysis uses interview data from a range of participants involved with education institutions or social policy provision. The interviews were carried out in London during January and February 2003. Unpublished documents gathered during this time have also been used as a part of this analysis.

Using this data, I provide a brief overview of Tower Hamlets and the Excellence in Cities policy initiative. I posit the notion of 'crisis populations' as a way of exploring links between education policy and urban disadvantage, and offer an example of 'policy refraction', suggesting that 'educational renovation' may provide a spatial reading that helps us to explore the mutually constitutive nature of education policy.

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Located immediately to the east of the City of London, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets has experienced a decline in employment and investment over the last fifty years. However, in 1987 the Thatcher Conservative government created the London Docklands Development Corporation and the southern part of Tower Hamlets underwent radical change. After suffering financial setbacks in the early 1990s the area, known as the 'Docklands' or Canary Wharf, is now a financial centre, a 'lifestyle precinct' with shopping and bars, plus extensive new residential enclaves (see Foster, 1999). Despite these developments, Tower Hamlets is one of the most disadvantaged areas in the United Kingdom as clearly illustrated by the key areas of employment and housing.

In 1998 61% of households earned an annual income of less than £9000 (Tower Hamlets Local Education Authority, 2003). Tower Hamlets has an unemployment rate of 6.6% while the national average was 3.4% (Office of National Statistics, 2003). In terms of housing, 29% of households live in owner occupied housing, 19% rent privately or live rent-free while 53% live in social rented housing, that is renting from the local Council, a Housing Association or a Registered Social Landlord (Office of National Statistics, 2003). One in eight homes are overcrowded, which is twice the London average (Tower Hamlets Local

Education Authority, 2003). Tower Hamlets receives the third highest Neighbourhood Renewal Unit funding in London (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2003).

The area of Islandton is one of the most deprived areas within Tower Hamlets bounded by three major arterial roads that isolate it from the surrounding areas. According to the Indices of Deprivation (with rank 1 being the most deprived ward in England out of 8,414 wards) the wards that make up the Islandton area - Barrier, Sandbar and Shawl (all pseudonyms) are ranked 67th, 47th and 152nd respectively (Office of National Statistics, 2003).

Tower Hamlets and Educational Change

Tower Hamlets is also one of the most educationally disadvantaged Local Education Authorities (LEA) in England (Tower Hamlets Local Education Authority, 2003). Neighbourhood renewal policies and educational initiatives aimed at disadvantaged areas are played out in the borough such as the Excellence in Cities (EiC) program.

Funded through the Standards section of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) the EiC program was launched in 1999 as a 'key policy initiative for redressing educational disadvantage and underperformance in [particularly secondary] schools located within the most deprived urban areas in England' (Stoney, West, Kendall, & Morris, 2002: 1). The DfES claims that EiC:

...tackles the particular problems facing children in our cities. Through a combination of initiatives, it aims to raise the aspirations and achievements of pupils and to tackle disaffection, social exclusion, truancy and indiscipline and improve parent's confidence in cities (Department for Education and Skills, 2003)

A LEA is designated by the DfES to be an EiC if it meets two criteria: 25% or more students are eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs) and schools are performing poorly in Key Stage Indicators. As an EiC a LEA operates with a partnership board that has the LEA and all the secondary schools in the LEA as board members. EiC has seven policy strands, one of which is EiC Action Zones. Other school functions outside of EiC remain the responsibility of the LEA. The Tower Hamlets LEA was made an EiC in March 1999 (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) with 62% of students eligible for FSMs and the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy in country (Tower Hamlets Local Education Authority, 2003).

Excellence in Cities and 'Crisis Populations'

Gerwitz (2001) suggests New Labour's education policy has two key facets. One is the focus on methods of delivery to improve provision in disadvantaged areas; and the second is the idea of a 'culture of achievement' (p.365) addressing perceived deficiencies in the attitudes of working class parents. New Labour labels these parents "families in challenging circumstances", families who are "socially excluded", and families living in "areas of disadvantage" (p.366). The EiC initiative is a new delivery mechanism for education programs in disadvantaged areas. Parental involvement is seen as necessary, but perhaps deficient, as evidenced by the Tower Hamlets EiC Project Co-ordinator who stated that '[...] one of the key things [...] is to target] parental will, support, attitudes and even their understanding of education [...].'

EiC focuses on the aspirations and needs of individual students and parents and targets what I identify as 'crisis populations'. School populations in Tower Hamlets, and the Islandton

area, are located within a number of discourses including the dominant EiC discourse of combating social exclusion by raising individual student achievement. As Power et al (2002) note there is a definite correlation between educational achievement and deprived areas. However, the conceptions of disadvantage and attainment are narrow when an area is targeted to be an EiC. To become an EiC there must be populations in disadvantaged areas that are seen to be underachieving. Poverty is seen as FSM eligibility and attainment is seen in terms of standards according to Key Stage Indicators. Ergo, the solution to poverty is to raise standards with the emphasis on the student in a school setting.

Alternatively, I contend that 'crisis populations' targeted by EiC are positioned by discourses of ethnicity, class and gender in regards to such things as employment and housing. These discourses need to be identified in order to understand the 'policy refraction' inherent in the implementation of EiC policy in Islandton.

Urban disadvantage and a 'crisis population' in Tower Hamlets

With a high unemployment rate Tower Hamlets has issues regarding the type of work available. While the unemployment rate is significant:

...[o]f greater significance is the limited range of jobs which have been traditionally available since the closure of the docks and associated businesses. Many of the Bangladeshi families work in a range of small business either associated with the clothing industry or restaurants and retail outlets (Islandton Partnership, 2001: 4).

Furthermore, the Canary Wharf development is not offering many new or varied employment opportunities to the people of Islandton (Islandton Partnership, 1999: 4). The majority of work at the 'Docklands' for local people in Tower Hamlets tends to be 'blue-collar' - low-skill and low-paid (Wills, 2001). The nature of employment raises issues for other groups such as women, and, in particular, Bangladeshi women. In Islandton:

[...] there's high levels of unemployment. Many of the Bangladeshi um, er fathers work in catering and that is in, pause, some is in the Canary Wharf area and some is in central London, anywhere in this area. Sometimes the fathers are away, working in restaurants in Kent or in outer London areas but the family, the family lives here, [...] um, with, where the father is working in restaurants, um, with Bangladeshi families the mother is usually there, but um some, some of them find it quite difficult with issues of isolation for Bangladeshi women, looking after families on their own.

(Headteacher, Bygrove Primary)

This isolation is also played out in terms of housing. The co-ordinator for the early childhood intervention service Surestart, suggests that many of the problems of housing remain out of sight.

[...] I think the majority of the problems are unseen, there is a huge number of people that rarely, if ever, leave their homes [...] we're actually going round and uncovering families where the [pre-school age] children literally never leave house, where they haven't got a stick of furniture, in the room, or no toys, or there not, you know, just unbelievable situations, that, um, they can't come to any one's attention because they never leave the house to tell anybody

(Surestart co-ordinator)

Furthermore, there are issues of overcrowding and of race associated with housing allocation. Glynn (2002) claims that there is an 'endemic housing crisis' (p.974) in Tower Hamlets and

that ‘a history of uneven housing allocation, along with exceptionally large families, has meant that the Bengalis have always been among the worst sufferers’ (p.974). Additionally, many participants noted that overcrowding or poor quality housing was an impediment to student’s completion of homework or general wellbeing. Similarly, Power et al (2002) cite Benn and Chitty’s (1996) study that found sub-standard housing affects educational attainment.

Changing populations, changing ‘crisis populations’

Employment and housing are issues that are also played out in terms of the changing population of Tower Hamlets. The key ethnic populations in Tower Hamlets are the Black (6.5 %), the White (51.4 %), and the Asian populations (36.6%) (Office of National Statistics, 2003). There are also an increasing number of people from war zones. However, the school population shows a much greater proportion of Bangladeshi students than the general population (see Table 1). The borough’s population has increased, with Bangladeshi students recording the biggest increase. There have been corresponding decreases in Caribbean and English, Scottish and Welsh students.

Ethnic Background	1991		1995		2001		Total Change 1991 -2001	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Bangladeshi	13770	46.2	18005	52.2	21084	60.6	+7314	+14.4
Caribbean	1817	6.1	1442	4.2	1294	3.7	- 523	-2.4
Eng, Scot, Wel	10493	35.2	10541	30.6	7632	21.9	-2861	-13.3
Somali	189	0.6	339	1.0	521	1.5	+332	+0.9
Other African	---	---	864	2.5	1128	3.2	+264*	+0.7*
Other	3506	11.9	3303	9.5	3158	9.1	-348	-2.8
TOTAL	29775	100	34494	100	34817	100	+5042	+16.9%

Table 1. Ethnic background of school population 1991 – 2001

*Notes: * Figures only available 1995-2001*

When looking at the Islandton area these figures are somewhat different. Within the Islandton Partnership EiC Action Zone the students in primary schools are between 25% - 75% white, and at the secondary school it is over 50% (Islandton Partnership, 1999: 4).

The white and black populations are those that have shown mobility out of Tower Hamlets and are leaving the local schools. Consequently, the ‘crisis population’ consists of predominantly Bangladeshi, Black and ‘residual’ White students. This is similar in Islandton where, taking these changes into account, there certainly appears to be a relationship between changing populations, housing and schooling. As the Headteacher of Bygrove Primary states:

[...] we’ve changed from being a predominantly white school to an increasingly bilingual, ethnic minority school and I think that reflects the area, and um, a major change has been the housing, when I came here [...] it was all council property. So there’s been a transition from local authority housing to housing corporation, [...], um, and many people have moved out, er, [...], and parts of the change from a predominantly white population has been the more prosperous and the better educated and the more ambitious parents are the ones who’ve moved out, they’ve moved out to um, more suburban areas and er, we have more ethnic minority families moving in

(Headteacher, Bygrove Primary)

The white ambitious parents have moved out, and by default those that are left are assumed to be underachievers, the residual 'crisis population' made up of the 'ethnic minority' families, and what many participants termed the white 'indigenous' population (see Massey, 1994 for discussion). One participant raised the notion of a 'indigenous' population who '[has] not got out' and is resentful of those that are coming into the area and those that have left. The 'crisis population's' options contrast markedly with the strategies of the middle-classes identified by Ball et al (1995) and Robson and Butler (2001).

This contrast becomes more evident when located within the context of physical changes that have taken place in the 'Docklands'. Eade (1997) suggests that the 'Docklands' has been renamed as a 'new' place of aspiration and endeavour in order to distinguish it from the 'old' place synonymous with crime and poverty. In the 'new' place there has been an influx of global capital that has provided opportunities for those outside of Tower Hamlets. Within Tower Hamlets one group marginalised is the Bangladeshi population who have not experienced increased opportunities despite the changes. Through interviews with real estate agents Eade (1997) concludes that the target for the 'Docklands' is global investors and 'new' residents rather than the community that I have termed 'crisis populations'. Furthermore, Eade (1997) asserts that local real estate agents do not consider the Bangladeshi population as 'aspirational'. Rather the estate agents see the white population as the real 'East Enders' and will target those that have 'made good' and wish to return. Ironically, the static white 'indigenous' population is also excluded from this group.

More specifically in the Islandton area that borders the 'Docklands' people see themselves as missing out on the investment that has been redirected into various social and educational programs. The Bygrove Primary headteacher notes that:

[with] the Docklands redevelopment [...] lots of additional funding went into the Docklands development area, the Isle of Dogs, but none of it ever came to Islandton, and so there was a real feel that it was an area with high levels of deprivation and all the previous schemes to ah, enhance education had missed out on this area.

(Headteacher, Bygrove Primary)

Nonetheless, Canary Wharf is used by some as a focus of aspiration for students with some student participants stating that they would like to work there. Others, among them a 17 year old white 'indigenous' ex-student' saw Canary Wharf as:

ah, I don't think it's a place for, pause, like really my kind, I see Canary Wharf as like a business people's place, I don't really see it as a place for youngsters. When I go there I feel out of place really, that's why I don't really go there a lot

(Islandton Ex-student)

The location of the Canary Wharf development concurrently plays a role as the focus of aspirations and a reminder of the everyday conditions for the 'crisis population'. These conditions provide the context for an exploration in 'policy refraction'.

'Policy refraction': EiC and 'crisis populations'

The EiC Action Zones strand of EiC has some crossover with the Education Action Zone (EAZs) initiative announced in June 1998. EAZs are combinations of secondary and primary

schools with an emphasis on private/ public sector involvement in education (see Dickson & Power, 2001; Gamarnikow & Green, 1999; Power & Gerwitz, 2001).

Existing EAZs that are in an EiC become EiC Action Zones. EiC Action Zones are charged with enabling 'local partnerships to target action and develop innovative and radical solutions that will raise educational standards' (Department of Education and Skills, 2003). The Tower Hamlets EiC has three action zones including the Islandton Partnership EiC Action Zone that was formed in 1999. Initially an EAZ, with the formation of the Tower Hamlets EiC, Islandton became an EiC Action Zone. The zone incorporates five primary schools and one secondary school

In this section I wish to briefly to explore the idea of 'policy refraction' in Islandton that I contend takes place under the auspices of EiC. Following Lipsky's (1980 cited in Ham & Hill) notion of 'street-level bureaucrats' who redefine policy at the level of implementation, 'policy refraction' is used by Taylor et al (1997) to describe the way that the practices of people 'on-the-ground' can lead to a distortion of original policy intentions. Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) also note this occurrence in reference to policy contexts. Refraction of the EiC policy in Islandton can be illustrated by contrasting the way the EiC Project Co-ordinator interprets the aims of EiC with a project undertaken by the Islandton action zone.

The Project Co-ordinator is clear when outlining the function of the Islandton action zone. Reiterating the position that EiC strands are about school based initiatives, she states that:

[...]the thing is that the zone must focus on its kids, its pupils, that's what it is there for and the key is to look at what is it that is preventing those pupils from really taking hold of their learning opportunities and running with them and opening up their horizons and aiming for anything and everything. That's the key question that the zone must always ask itself.

(EiC Project Co-ordinator)

The idea of opening up opportunities, or 'aspirations' ties in with how EiC positions the education and poverty. This notion that education is a positional benefit is reinforced by the EiC co-ordinator who asserts that:

it is not [the zone's] remit to actually ah, um to have as their main focus improving the, the quality-of-life in that area, it should impact on that by driving at the children and sometimes I think perhaps there is some...misunderstanding

(EiC Project Co-ordinator)

'Misunderstanding' for the Project Co-ordinator becomes redefinition for the action zone. Two examples, one the idea of zone targets, and the second a joint program between the action zone and the local housing association, represents the nuances inherent in the implementation of EiC.

Each year the zone must nominate 'key targets for improvement' that are approved by the DfES– these include quantitative and qualitative targets (Islandton Partnership, 2001). Quantitative targets include such things as Key Stage Indicators results. Borough averages are below the national average in all Key Stage Indicators. In terms of attainment levels in English and Maths, in 2002 the Action Zone was equal or below the borough average on all the Key Stage Indicators for KS1 to KS3, with the exception of KS3 Maths. At secondary level the difference is greatest at GCSE level with the zone 23% below the national average in terms of 5 or more A-C grades. Nonetheless, the secondary school in the zone was

announced as one of seven Tower Hamlets secondary schools that ‘won awards for rapid increases in pupil achievement’ (London Borough of Tower Hamlets, 2003)

Qualitative targets include integrating the zone’s work with ‘other major developmental work’ in the area such as neighbourhood renewal and ‘improving parental understanding of the education system, the curriculum, and their role in the process of educating children’ (Islandton Partnership, 2001: 8).

The quantitative targets satisfy the accountability focus set by the DfES, while the qualitative targets may result in some interesting and creative projects that are outside the ‘remit’ of the zone. The co-ordinator of the local housing association describes an adult education program that was run between the action zone and the housing association aimed at improving housing conditions and educational achievement:

[...] we [...] now work more closely with the education action zone around some creative ideas, um, and those, the things that we do will certainly help towards children’s attainment levels in school [...an example of a project with parents is a] DIY, DIY project and, um, that was through the education action zone, in fact their parents, and identifying that there was a bit of concern or issue around, particularly women who wanted to do things like change their plugs [...or globes] and not have to call out, you know a builder, and save lots of money. Um, so [the action zone] got together a proposal and they linked up with us so we helped to provide space for it to be delivered and helped to provide trainers, um, and linked it with the IT facility that we have and made it into, you know, quite a nice package,

(Housing Association Co-ordinator)

What is evident is that the implementation of EiC policy by the action zone positions the schooling of the ‘crisis population’ very much in the mundane ‘everyday’ of home repairs. This is policy being assessed for its usefulness by those ‘on-the-ground’. Funding allows the zone to operate in partnership with other local groups to target a ‘crisis population’ need, that of improving a home environment and the financial situation of families, and consequently improving a study environment. This practice distorts the way policy delivery is envisaged according to the EiC Project Director. The focus on standards in the form of Key Stage Indicators are flagged, however, the context in which improvements will take place is seen to move outside the school gates. The interpretation of the aims of EiC by the Islandton zone is to help disadvantaged students by explicitly aiming at the ‘quality of life’ of student’s parents, particularly women.

Islandton and ‘Educational Renovation’

This moving outside of the school gates is implicit in the way that ‘educational renovation’ characterises policy refraction. ‘Educational renovation’ depicts the mediation between the local, national and transnational and highlights the mutually constitutive nature of the EiC policy in Islandton. Following from ideas such as Bowe, Ball and Gold’s (1992) ‘contexts of policy’, ‘educational renovation’ recognises that not only does policy operate on people directly and indirectly, but that it is inherently about the multiple spaces in which people experience the everyday.

The neo-liberal state is dominant in EiC’s discourse of standards and attainment targets underpinning policy that relates to education and poverty. However, as the example of the parent’s DIY workshop shows, within Islandton there is a process of ‘renovation’ underway. A rebirth of existing educational facilities using new approaches that to some extent

recognise the particularity of people's conditions - an appreciation that 'crisis population' issues of schooling do not end, or start, at the school gate (Symes, 2003). In the Islandton instance this involves issues for transnational migrants and exclusion from the flows of global capital, and the notion of an 'indigenous' static population.

The recognition of housing conditions and low income being a context of schooling is, I would argue, an example of a localized expression of change, in which EiC is reinterpreted and adapted to existing structures in new and creative ways. 'On-the-ground' there is an inventiveness of policy, a policy of hope perhaps, in which people are realising or enabling different options. The DIY project appears to be distant from the aims of EiC, yet is conceived as a crucial part of broader policies of education, urban and neighbourhood renewal and inner city 'resuscitation' in Islandton. In a way 'educational renovation' is a creative response to the lack of mobility of the 'crisis population'.

While the Blair government recognises the context of education in policies such as Neighbourhood Renewal and EiC it is obvious that change is not immediate. As some participants noted, what happens when the funding ends? Long term funding is needed which builds on successful ideas – interesting ideas that are worthwhile and allow 'crisis populations' to be active in processes of 'educational renovation'.

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