

# Bias that killed the dream of equality

Schools in crisis, part 2: How the system works against the poor

Nick Davies reports from Sheffield

Wednesday September 15, 1999

The Guardian

Once upon a time, in the late 1960s, well-meaning politicians accepted the most progressive idea in the history of British education. They decided to establish a national network of schools which would deal equally with all children, providing a free secondary education for all students of all backgrounds, without favour of class or ability. They called these new schools "comprehensive".

It was an idea with a powerful anger behind it, a disgust at the old two-tiered system in which children were segregated at 11: those most in need of education were tipped into second-class schools with sparse resources and no sixth forms, while those who were most able were given more resources and their own A-level classes. The second-tier schools - the secondary moderns - were stigmatised, as were their pupils.

The fact that middle class children tended to prosper in this system while the poor failed, rubbed political salt in the social wound.

Ever since then, this brave new idea has been awash with controversy. It has been accused of penalising the brightest children, of fostering a culture of non-achievement, of allowing egalitarian dogma to smother educational opportunity. It has been blamed for the low levels of literacy and numeracy which have left Britain struggling in international league tables. The government remains beset by hostile questions about the system's current performance and its future prospects.

And yet, this long and fevered debate has begged its most important question. The underlying issue is not whether comprehensive schools are good or bad but whether they exist. There is almost no voice in Britain now to claim that our state system is adequate. But is it a system of comprehensives, or is this a system whose weaknesses have a very different origin? Consider the case of Sheffield, political home of the education secretary, David Blunkett.

Sheffield wears its social divisions on its sleeve. Roughly speaking, the working class - with or without work - live in the old housing estates and red-brick terraces of the north-east; while the affluent middle class live in the pleasant suburbs of the south-west, known in the city as the White Highlands. Such a separation means the social tensions behind the classroom scenes are peculiarly easy to see. The city also has relatively few private schools, and so the education game is played out almost entirely within the state sector.

This is the tale of two comprehensives. The first is Abbeydale Grange. It is a classic example of a struggling inner city school, the kind that is often held up as the clearest evidence of the failure of the comprehensive ideal.

The second is Silverdale, the jewel in the city's educational crown, a school whose consistently high academic achievements have made it one of the most praised in the country. It is the kind of success story often used as a stick to beat those who lag behind in the league tables.

Now go back 30 years, to the dawn of the comprehensive system in Sheffield. The first thing you see is that the picture is flipped on its head.

The top school in the city is not Silverdale but Abbeydale Grange, newly created out of three old grammar schools, two for girls and one for boys. Abbeydale is a model of old-fashioned order and high-octane academic achievement, with enviable results in O levels and A levels. And Silverdale, well, Silverdale is struggling, because while it has become a comprehensive and is acquiring a new sixth form, its reputation is rooted in its history - as a charmless secondary modern.

The second thing you see - the really important thing - is the start of a curiously English story. It features a little snobbery, a dash of racism (generally unacknowledged) and a great deal of class politics. It begins here, with the two schools setting out on their journey towards equality, it unfolds over the next 30 years and it ends with a nasty twist in its tale.

In the beginning three decades ago, of course, neither school was comprehensive in anything but name. Each school continued in the inertia of its old reputation: Abbeydale Grange was still a posh school, attracting the children of the middle class; Silverdale was still for those local middle class children who were less likely to prosper academically. But by the early 1980s, something new was happening. Abbeydale Grange's new catchment area cut a slice out of some of the most deprived streets in Sheffield. The school was no longer protected by the high fence of the 11-plus exam and the city council had been encouraging "ordinary people" to enrol. The children of poor families began to turn up in the playground. Some of them were black. A few of the white middle class parents made it plain that they did not like this and left.

By the early 1980s, the school's numbers had fallen from 2,300 to fewer than 2,000. However, most were insulated from these new arrivals by the school's system of setting, which meant that only the brightest of the new arrivals entered the classrooms of the white middle class.

City councilors, however, were concerned to help the children of constituents who complained that they were being pushed into the bottom sets and streams of the old "posh" schools. They started to push for the adoption of mixed-ability teaching: the poor and the rich, the slow and the bright would be taught together.

A lot of teachers objected. They were overruled. More white middle class families pulled out. The numbers at Abbeydale Grange declined a little more.

In the background, the child population nationally had been falling, but Labour councils like Sheffield (led by one D Blunkett, under the slogan Socialism In One City) had made a pact with the teacher unions whose influence had grown as the old industrial unions had collapsed: there were to be no teacher redundancies.

The result was that schools were bloated with spare capacity, and, although the city did its best to arrange balanced intakes of students, parents from a school like Abbeydale Grange found it easy to transfer their children to a "quieter" school, in an affluent white suburb, a school like Silverdale.

Freed from its second class status by the removal of the 11-plus, bolstered by its new sixth form, Silverdale had slowly become the natural home for more of the children in its middle class neighbourhood. With its new intake of well-motivated and well-supported children scoring strongly in O-levels and A-levels, its reputation began to climb. It filled its spare places. Abbeydale, however, with its classrooms beginning to admit the children of the poor, who were tethered by disadvantage, saw its reputation fade. The retreat of the white middle class picked up pace until, by 1985, there were only 1,500 children on the roll.

At this stage, 15 years into their new identity, two points were clear. First, neither school had yet developed a comprehensive intake. Second, the changing fortunes of the two schools had nothing to do with their educational performance. This was still a time when government and local education authorities funded schools and left it for them to decide how to behave. Unpestered and unsupervised, each school had continued to teach much as it always had. At Abbeydale Grange, the same headteacher, WJ Grenville Massey, had run the school in the same orthodox fashion for the first 13 years of its comprehensive life. And yet one had started to decline while the other had started to thrive - simply because the middle-class had started shifting their support from one to the other.

Thus far, however, the change had been slow, an almost unconscious social shift. Now, in the late 1980s, this steady smouldering burst into flames, as the Tories in the department of education intervened.

First, Sir Keith Joseph played a hand. In search of savings, Sheffield city council had decided to close all the sixth forms in the city and to create tertiary colleges. Sir Keith, however, was lobbied by parents from the White Highlands and he ruled that, while schools in the rest of the city might lose their sixth-forms, those in the south-west - which happened to elect the only Tory MP in the city - should keep theirs. It was a moment of complete reversal. Silverdale, which as a secondary modern had had no sixth form, now kept its A-level students: they were role models for the younger students, they supported better science labs and language labs, they brought prestige to the school. Abbeydale Grange, once the plump and well-fed grammar school, lost its sixth form and was now officially and visibly a second rank school.

Then Kenneth Baker took over as education secretary. In a volley of changes, led by the 1988 education reform act, he created a market in state schooling. The education authorities lost the power to assign children to schools; parents alone would choose. The schools would test their children, the results would be published in league tables, which would have a powerful influence on this parental choice. The schools which attracted the most children would be rewarded with extra funds: the vast bulk of the budget of each school would now be decided by the number of students on its roll. A flood of change swept through Sheffield.

By this time, South Yorkshire's steel and coal industries had been torn to ribbons by Thatcherism.

Unemployment climbed. The property market collapsed. Asian immigrants moved into the disintegrating inner city and the north-east of Sheffield, and sent their children to the local schools.

### **Surge of anxiety**

There was a surge of anxiety about falling academic standards and a new wave of old-fashioned racial hostility. With the gates thrown open by "parental choice", Abbeydale Grange suddenly found itself the scene of a full-blooded white flight. Now there was nothing slow or unconscious about it: by the early 1990s, the school which had once boasted 2,300 pupils had been abandoned by almost all of the white middle class and was left with fewer than 500 pupils. In the White Highlands, Silverdale was booming. In theory, it was open to the children of the poor families in the north-east to make the same move. This had never been easy. Children from the north-east who were bright enough for the grammar schools in the south-west had always felt trapped behind a social barrier. But now, the freedom of choice which the government offered in one hand, was taken away with the other.

The department of education ordered cuts. Across the country, local education authorities were instructed to improve the productivity of their schools by slashing their spare capacity. Sheffield lost more than 30 primary and secondary schools. The spare places vanished and were replaced by rules - adopted by

almost every local education authority - which stipulated that if too many children applied for one school, places would be open to those who lived closest to the school and to those who had siblings there. Middle-class parents fled from Abbeydale Grange and bought their way in to Silverdale's catchment area. No poor family from the north-east could afford to make the move. Children in the north-east were left to make do with their struggling local schools. All parents could choose, but some could choose more than others.

Now, the two schools were almost completely polarised in their intake. Dr Phil Budgell, former chief inspector of schools in the city, analysed census data for indicators of poverty and wealth and translated it to the city's schools. His figures revealed that poor children at Abbeydale Grange outnumbered the affluent by more than 3-1. Affluent children at Silverdale outnumbered the poor by the same factor. Today, Abbeydale Grange has one of the most disadvantaged intakes in the city: 53% of its pupils claim free school meals, the most commonly used measure of poverty in schools. At Silverdale, in the White Highlands, only 7% take free meals - less than half the national average. Forty five per cent of Abbeydale's pupils have special educational needs, compared to less than 2% of Silverdale's. Neither school now is comprehensive in anything but name. Neither school now is any more comprehensive than it was 30 years ago. In those days, the children were selected by examiners. Now, they are selected by estate agents.

This same tide swept through all the state schools in the city. By the time the 1988 act had completed what the middle class had spontaneously started, the figures collated by Dr Budgell suggested that only five of the 27 secondary schools in the city could claim to have developed a comprehensive intake, with a comparable number of children from both affluent and poor homes. The intake of the other 22 was clearly imbalanced in one direction or the other, often even more so than that of Abbeydale Grange or Silverdale. Some of the schools in the north-east were swamped by poverty: Fir Vale School, for example, had 55% of its pupils from poor homes and only 11% from affluent; Waltheof had 50% poor and only 11% affluent. Give or take a little local detail, the same story has been told around the country. Northern Ireland has never tried to go comprehensive; Scotland has done so with some success, but in England and Wales, only a minority of schools has succeeded in becoming comprehensive: sometimes they are in small towns where there is only one state secondary and not enough social problems to frighten the middle class into private schools; sometimes they have grown through the cracks in big cities, usually by virtue of geographical accident combined with a deliberate policy from the headteacher.

There are cities which have more private schools than Sheffield and where it is the private sector rather than the suburban state schools which have skimmed off the bright middle class children. There are cities where the social geography is not as clear as Sheffield's and where mixed areas - like Wandsworth in south London - have introduced "aptitude tests" to finish the job which the local estate agents alone cannot do. The end result is the same.

And this matters: not simply because the political will of the government 30 years ago has been frustrated; nor even because those schools which are not comprehensive are nevertheless judged as though they were. It matters most of all because this divisive intake directly jeopardises the educational performance of the schools and the children within them.

The evidence is overwhelming that the single most important factor in a school's performance is its intake: bright children who perform well can lift the performance of others around them. If the bright middle-class children are being siphoned off into private schools and a minority of state schools like Silverdale, then children in the rest of the system will fail to achieve comparable standards. Not because the system is comprehensive. The reverse is true.

### **Struggling children**

The system fails because it is segregated, because it leaves the struggling children to struggle alone. Look again at the pattern of exam failure, analysed in detail in yesterday's paper.

In Sheffield, just as the intakes are socially polarised, so the results of the schools are academically divided: the ones with an affluent intake score the high marks in exams; the ones with the disadvantaged intakes struggle.

Dr Budgell found that, with small variations, he could take the table which ranked the poverty of the intake of Sheffield's schools, turn it upside down and find himself looking at the table which ranked academic success. At Abbeydale Grange last year, 22% of the children managed to score at least five A to C grades at GCSE. At Silverdale, 76% did so.

The headteachers at both schools are full of praise for their staff and also pride in their very different results, but neither of them makes false claims. Abbeydale's results are somewhat better than those of other schools with deprived intakes - because the school has managed to hold on to a small group of very bright children.

The headteacher, Jan Woodhead, said: "We are very lucky in the sense that we have still got the support of a number of middle class families, and we keep them because we do a good job for their children." The headteacher of Silverdale, Helen Storey, is similarly realistic: "I would n't say we are doing something wonderful here that they are not doing at Abbeydale. We do many things in common with other schools to

raise attainment. I wouldn't think we are radically different to any other school in that. You are quite likely to be able to achieve more if you have 10% difficult children than if you have 40% difficult children." Bright children succeed and, if there are enough of them, they spread success to the poorer children. Poor children are inclined to fail and, if you isolate them, you guarantee failure. Here is the truth which almost every teacher knows and almost every politician denies: a school system which becomes as socially polarised as Britain's, is guaranteed to generate failure.

And it gets worse. Like the killer that has not been caught, the market which was established in 1988 is still out there, stalking the schools. The early damage was done by the combination of cuts and "parental choice", polarising school catchment areas by house price. But the market has other means of attack and now, with each year that goes by, the polarisation becomes worse. The key to this is that when the children move, they take the money with them. The successful school becomes richer; the struggling school becomes poorer.

It works like this. In round numbers, under the funding formula set up by Kenneth Baker, a local education authority will pay a school, say, £2,000 a year for each child who is enrolled. Every year, schools compete with each other to attract new 11-year-olds. They look for them in blocks of 30, the maximum which most secondary schools are happy to see in one classroom.

### **Better results**

The successful school, with its exam results published and acclaimed, can recruit an extra 30 children and put an extra £60,000 into the bank. But it does not cost an extra £60,000 to teach the 30 children. Providing it has the classroom space, the school's overheads remain the same. All the school has to do is to hire an extra teacher, who might cost about £25,000, pay a little more for heat and books, a total outlay of no more than £30,000.

The result is that the successful school not only expands and funds its expansion but pockets a profit of £30,000 which it can use to buy more books or computers or spare time for its teachers, all of which may help it to improve its performance, thus generating still better results and more children for the following year.

On the other end of the seesaw, the struggling school is pushed further and further down: it loses 30 prospective students and loses £60,000 out of its budget; it can save some money by making a teacher redundant but still it has to find some £30,000 of cuts to balance the budget, thus reducing its chances of lifting its exam results. And every year, the results are published in all their misleading glory, ensuring that the reputations of the schools become a little more polarised so that their fortunes can become a little more divided.

When Jan Woodhead took over as headteacher at Abbeydale Grange in 1994, "white flight" had left the school insolvent. "The school was dying," she says. To make matters worse, John Major's government was still squeezing education budgets, and the more successful schools in Sheffield were trying to protect themselves by recruiting extra children and they targeted Abbeydale's possible intake. The school needed at least 120 new children to survive but, in September 1995, the market delivered only 73.

The next year, the market delivered Abbeydale only 56. And it was the bright children from the aspirational families who were making it through the appeals process to reach other schools in the White Highlands. The struggling school was losing the best of its intake, and it was broke.

By 1997, Abbeydale Grange was a £250,000 in debt. The local education authority, recognising that if the school closed, it would still have to support these children, came to its rescue with £180,000. The school cut the remaining £70,000 out of its budget, slashing its management and stretching its teaching staff so severely that within months they had to reverse the cuts in order to keep the school running. Last year, the education authority licensed the school to run at a loss. The system does not deliver. Jan Woodhead said: "The funding formula is based on the concept that you have your basic kid who costs a basic amount of money. Here, that concept has been tested to destruction."

The struggle goes on. By 1998, Jan Woodhead had re-marketed Abbeydale Grange, turning its loss of pupils to its advantage - "the small school that makes a big difference" - and celebrating its success at assimilating different cultures. The shortage of places in the rest of the city meant that numerous parents who applied for other schools were turned down and diverted to Abbeydale.

In early summer of 1998, the school looked relatively safe, with 154 new children on its list. But, across the city, Silverdale was trying to cope with its own funding crisis by increasing its year 7 intake from 150 to 180. Twenty-nine families had appealed against their Abbeydale places, asking to go to Silverdale. In search of funds, Silverdale decided not to contest any of the appeals. By the beginning of September, Abbeydale had lost all 29 children to its more successful competitor. To make the injury worse, Abbeydale was already committed to hiring enough teachers for 150 children. More money lost.

This year, Silverdale agreed to recruit only 150 new students. Nevertheless, the system did the damage. The education authority allowed 162 students to claim places at Silverdale, assuming that some of them would drop out before September. They had underestimated the extent of the polarisation: parents were not just opting for Silverdale, they were investing all their hopes in it. Not one of them dropped out.

Then 23 others who had been denied places, appealed and four of them lived close enough to Silverdale to win. So they had 166 new students - too many for five classrooms, not enough for six. The education authority agreed that if Silverdale still had 166 children on its list in September, they would pay for an extra classroom to house them. And if that happened, there would be spare capacity for 14 more children - so more of the appeals which had been lost would be reversed. And so it is that this month Silverdale has once more emerged from the muddle of the market, with 180 new pupils while Abbeydale Grange once more has lost its new recruits.

At Silverdale, headteacher Helen Storey offers no defence for the system: "I phoned Jan Woodhead at Abbeydale. She's spitting feathers. I'm not happy with it either. It's not managing the situation effectively. This awful polarisation is really very unhelpful."

The market has one more weapon with which to bludgeon the weak and wounded - academic cleansing. Throughout the country there are headteachers so anxious for their schools to do well in the league tables that they get rid of students likely to perform badly in exams. They can do this by denying the difficult child a place: all they have to do is to claim that they are full, and nobody checks. Or, if the child is already inside their classrooms, they can do this by formally excluding them, but that makes the school look bad. And so secretly, they call in the student's parents, warn them their child is about to be excluded and let them remove the child voluntarily.

### **'Illegal and immoral'**

This not only rids the school of the difficult pupil without registering an exclusion, it also allows the school to keep the income from that child until their pupil numbers are next officially counted, which may be many months later. "It is illegal and immoral," according to one headteacher, "but it is also quite widespread."

But a struggling school which has vacancies cannot refuse to take a child who wants a place. In this way, Abbeydale Grange, already struggling with a high proportion of difficult children, last year received 60 more students, most of them with a record of disorder and disruption, many of whom arrived without bringing a single penny of funding with them.

All state schools complain that they are short of money. In Sheffield, even Silverdale, with its booming intake, is running on a deficit of £170,000 a year. If they balanced their budget, they say, they would have to close their sixth form or slash the curriculum. It has no spare staff; it is desperately short of facilities. Helen Storey said: "The system is so underfunded that everybody has some inequality to deal with."

But the schools with disadvantaged children are in an even worse state. Apart from losing cash as their results fall, they are dealing with a disproportionate number of children with special educational needs. In theory, these children bring with them not just the standard funding but also some extra money. In practice, the department for education distributes funds for additional educational needs according to a formula which notoriously undershoots its target.

Schools are also given grants for a few children whose needs are so great that they are "statemented" for help from a group of agencies. This money can pay for a support assistant to work directly with the child. The trouble is that schools have started to apply for so many children to be statemented that education authorities like Sheffield have imposed a ceiling on the amount of money which they will pay out.

At Abbeydale, the roof leaks, the drama department has no lights, the cricket team has no pitch, ancient fire damage still scars the wall of the science room, last term's trip to Alton Towers was cancelled because there were no staff to take it, the boiler is broken, the driveway is crumbling, and, most important, there is a constant, daily, nagging shortage of cash for staff. "Our finances are surreal," said Jan Woodhead. "We're just not solvent."

### **'Horrendous backlash'**

It is all a very long way from the 30-year-old dream of a network of comprehensive schools. "It is not standing still. It is getting worse and worse. It is becoming more and more polarised. There is a horrendous backlash going to happen, and yet there is almost a wilful blindness to it." Jan Woodhead, headteacher at Abbeydale Grange, said that.

"The blunt truth is that Britain is still, after all these years, a place where class counts, where the best do not always come through and whose institutions reinforce a sense of us as a country living in our past, not learning from it." Tony Blair said that.

The comprehensives were attacked at birth by the subtle power of British class and then quietly smothered by the education reforms of the 1980s. Which raises one more question. Was that deliberate? Did the Tories set out to kill the comprehensives without admitting what they were doing? Or was it an accident? The man who knows is Kenneth Baker, now Lord Baker.

Tomorrow, he lifts the lid on the politics of education reform.

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