

## Revealed: the fatal flaw at the heart of our education system. Part 1 of a major three-part investigation

**Nick Davies in Sheffield**  
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This is the moment. The teacher with the bleeper has legs like an ostrich and takes the stairs three at a time. Within 30 seconds, he has reached the classroom which has called for help and he wades into the confusion.

The trouble is Terence. Terence is on a computer but he is refusing to work on the exercise he has been set. Instead, he is fooling with graphics, ignoring instructions, his chin resting insolently on one palm. The classroom teacher is torn between Terence and the other children, who are beginning to wander and chatter. The teacher on bleeper patrol tells Terence he must leave the room. Terence sullenly refuses and carries on toying with the screen. Two girls come over to eavesdrop on the confrontation. In the background, several boys swap insults in Punjabi.

This is the moment that lies at the heart of the often frantic debate about Britain's schools - when a teacher stands up in front of a class and teaching simply fails to take place. It is the moment which haunts a prime minister who famously declared that his three highest priorities were "education, education, education". This particular moment is occurring in a school right in the centre of Sheffield, the political cradle of the education secretary, David Blunkett.

The Bleeper Man persists. He has been on this kind of patrol many times before, acting as a kind of fireman who can be called out to deal with any crisis. Tantrums, fights, breaking windows, smoking cigarettes, all riddled in among the daily rituals of a stable school.

On a bad day, the bleeper will call for help 40 or 50 times - a crisis every eight minutes or so. He knows he has to be careful. A few weeks ago, a boy went up on the roof and dangled one leg over the edge, threatening to jump unless he was left alone. That time, the bleeper man quietly talked him down.

For several minutes, with the whole class wobbling on the verge of disintegration, Terence ignores the requests to leave, until suddenly he jumps to his feet, crashes his way through several unused chairs, sneers at the classroom teacher and surges out into the corridor where he marches off, drumming one fist loudly against the wall.

In the doorway at the end, he bumps into a 12-year-old girl, kicks her on the shin and vanishes around the corner. The class calms down, the teacher teaches and the Bleeper Man goes off in search of Terence, the electronic alarm squealing once more in his pocket.

Abbeydale Grange was once the cream of Sheffield's schools, a well-endowed comprehensive built out of three grammar schools with a tradition of high achievement and old-fashioned discipline.

In many ways, it still succeeds and yet now it is beset by trouble. It struggles to survive; its numbers have disintegrated from more than 2,000 to just over 500; only 22% of the pupils score five A-C grades at GCSE; its budget is drowning in deficit. It is one of the 40% of secondary schools in Britain which are said by Ofsted to fall below the required standard.

Why do some schools fail to deliver the best academic results? The big problem is trendy teaching methods (according to just about everybody on the right); it's a chronic shortage of resources (according to just about everybody on the left); it's teachers (Ofsted); it's Ofsted (teachers); it's a culture of low expectation (George Walden, the former Tory education minister); it's an overdose of intervention (the teacher unions); it's the abolition of grammar schools; the existence of private schools; the rigging of exam results; the shortage of nursery schools. It's the most important question in British public life. And yet the answer is torn like a fox between hounds.

### **Failed analysis**

This matters not simply as an exercise in failed analysis - there are plenty of policy questions which remain unanswered - but because in the last 15 years, education has attracted more intervention than any other area of government. From the sweeping Tory reforms of the late 1980s to the volley of initiatives from Labour since May 1997, this cacophony of answers has generated a crossfire of activity by the state. If the analysis is wrong, much of this activity has been shot into the dark.

Why do schools fail? Despite all the confusion, there is an answer to the question. The strange reality is that in an area which is so peculiarly riven with controversy and genuine doubt, there is one clear, undeniable truth - one factor which more than any other determines whether a school will succeed or fail in delivering academic results. It is something which is recognised by almost everyone directly involved in schools, and yet it remains overlooked by almost all outsiders and sidelined by almost all official discourse. The answer is revealed by the Bleeper Man.

It is ten o'clock in the morning at Abbeydale Grange, and already the bleeper has been busy: Dave has casually walked out of his class and gone to see his mates two doors away; a Somali lad has downed

tools and will not work; Joey is dancing on a table, whistling loudly so he cannot hear his teacher's protests.

The Bleeper Man ricochets between them, ferrying the unruly to the time-out room, where he finds Darren who is not supposed to be there at all. He was excluded yesterday, but his mother has sent him to school just the same. It is a contest with disorder.

Here on the wall is Shane's poem, one 11-year-old boy's image of education:

"School's crap, school's good. Every day, we come to school. It always rains.

And every day I get off my bus and go for a fag I say to myself:

'Well, there goes another day'. Teachers talking, students shouting.

When is all this noise going to stop?"

### **Lord of disorder**

Here comes Imran, long and lean and full of mouth, sauntering late into class with a bag of crisps, stopping to chat to friends on the way to his desk. Never mind the lesson struggling to survive. Never mind anything. Imran is already on a last warning. He threatened to take off his belt and thrash someone who crossed him and the headteacher has told him he is staring at permanent exclusion. Now, he grins as he swaggers towards his seat, a little lord of disorder.

What is going on in this place? It is not that the school is in chaos. There are no riots or rapes. Indeed, there are classrooms full of children who are learning. There are charismatic teachers and some brilliant kids - charming, clever kids, sporting stars, girls taking their GCSEs two and three years ahead of schedule.

But then there is this fragility, this constant bubbling of trouble threatening to erupt as if the teachers were pulling off a miracle every time they reached the end of a lesson without an explosion. As the bleeper man lopes through the school, juggling crises, the outline of the truth begins to emerge, slowly, through the blizzard of contradictory claims.

He talks about the day he followed an 11-year-old boy who had skived off class. When he caught up with him, he asked him simply "What's up?", and the boy slumped on to his stomach and started beating the lino with his fists, groaning with inexpressible pain.

He talks about the boy with the elfin face, who is sent to the time-out room three times today: he has no father, his mother cannot cope; he has an alarming medical problem and he knows it; he is 11 but he has the reading age of a six-year-old; his dearest wish is to be excluded permanently.

There is the boy who comes to school from some kind of hell with his mother and spends the day hiding in the hood of his coat; the girl who has lost her mother and her father and whose grandparents were so harsh with her that she went to social services and begged to be taken into care; the boy whose home burned down, killing his pet while he fought with the firemen who would not let him go into the flames to save it (and who is now obsessed with doom and destruction).

There are girls who get pregnant, boys with drug problems, kids who have been taught at home to beat the crap out of anyone who irritates them, a boy who has moved home seven times in seven months because neighbours keep attacking his mother - and several times a week, he disappears from school and trails back to their latest refuge to protect her.

There are 12-year-old girls who are the main carers in their family, feeding, clothing and supervising a cluster of younger siblings. This girl's brother has been beaten up by the local street gang. This boy's father is in prison. Somebody's mother is a drunk. Somebody's house has been torched by the neighbours. Here's a girl who has gone to the school office because her leg hurts, only to find that the police want to talk to her about reports that her stepfather has been assaulting her.

The children who are caught up by the bleeper patrol have more stories than Hollywood, but almost all of them have one thing in common. They are poor. And that is what matters. It is a simple thing. Every teacher knows it. There was a time when every government minister admitted it. The banal reality is that the single factor which more than any other determines a school's performance is its intake - the children who go there.

A small part of this is gender: girls at secondary school do better than boys. Everybody puzzles over it, but nobody can deny it. No single-sex girls' school, for example, has ever been failed by Ofsted. While 40% of Sheffield girls scored at least five A to C grades at GCSE last year, only 33% of boys did so. But the big factor is poverty.

### **Emotionally damaged**

If a school takes in a substantial proportion of children who come from a disadvantaged background - if their parents do not read, if they have no books at home, if they are awake half the night and then half asleep all day, if they have been emotionally damaged by problems in their family or in their community, if they have suffered from an environment which is likely to expose them to drug abuse and violence and alcohol abuse and the collapse of social boundaries, then the school is more likely to fail academically. A school which is based in a disadvantaged community will struggle with its children, while one that is based in a more affluent area will prosper.

This is not an occasional problem, but an endemic one. There are about 13.3 million children in Britain. On any available measure, 4.6 million of them live in poverty - and they are all enrolled in schools. The evidence that poverty undermines education is overwhelming - and has been for years. Yet governments deny it. The last government denied the poverty itself. This government admits the poverty but denies its impact.

By obscuring this simple reality, the public discourse on our school system has entered the realm of the absurd and become lost there. This is not to deny that there are good and bad teachers, that there are good and bad approaches to teaching, that schools can make a difference.

It is not to quarrel with the complaint that schools in the 1960s and 70s were allowed to drift into a state of unsupervised complacency or that ideologies of social engineering may often have interfered with education or that the Guardian among others on the left was seduced into some naive and unsupportable positions. But when those factors take their proper place in the picture, they slip out to the margins while the children take up the centre - and the host of political initiatives which ignore the children are revealed as mere alibis. Like all alibis, those initiatives may contain some element of truth but like all of the most dangerous alibis, they are essentially dishonest.

Until a few years ago, Dr Phil Budgell was the chief inspector of schools in Sheffield. He visited all the schools on his patch and noted their strengths and shortcomings. In search of an understanding of what he saw, Dr Budgell, a trained statistician, began to sift through the river of statistics which flowed into his department, panhandling it in search of patterns.

The poverty was obvious. Since 1979, South Yorkshire has lost 24% of its jobs, and nearly a quarter of Sheffield's children now live in families with no earner. Dr Budgell started using census material to tot up the indicators of poverty in each household - no earner, no car, over crowding, single parent, ethnic minority.

Then he switched to the database for the city's schools, pulled out the postcodes for every single pupil, matched this against the districts for which he had census data and produced an index of disadvantage for all the schools in Sheffield. He added in the distribution of girl pupils and also figures for those who simply failed to turn up for school in year 11, when exams were being taken, and he produced a table which ranked all 27 secondary schools in the city according to the difficulties of their intake.

#### **Poor families**

Then he looked at the academic outcomes of the 27 schools. He used seven different measures of exam results, including average scores, mean scores, A to C grades, A to G grades. There were small variations but essentially the picture was clear: the league table of schools which did well in exams was the reverse of the league table of difficult intakes. Dr Budgell found that more than 90% of the difference in exam results between schools was accounted for simply by the poverty, gender and final-year attendance of the children who were enrolled there. What was being done by the schools was influencing only the remaining 5 to 10%.

"I'm not saying that schools don't make a difference," he told the Guardian. "There are incompetent teachers, but in order to explain the failing of inner city schools in terms of incompetence you have to make the bizarre assumption that these schools have hired a mass of incompetent teachers while good schools have hired none. There is a volume of evidence that schools are not playing on a level playing field. When you look at these intake factors, the level playing field is more like the side of Mount Everest." Three secondary schools in Sheffield have been condemned by Ofsted and put into "special measures": Earl Marshall, Hinde House and Myrtle Springs. All three are in the north-east of the city, with an intake which is dominated by the children of poor families. At Fir Vale School, which has taken over from Earl Marshall, the headteacher Ken Cook has a pupil body of whom only 16% speak English as their first language. Most of the parents speak no English at all. On a Monday morning last term, he had seven Somali children turn up for their first day at school, fresh out of a war zone, without a sentence of English between them. "Within an hour they are in the classroom," he said, "and we are accountable for their performance."

At Hinde House school, the headteacher, Sarah Draper, deals with a similarly poor intake: "If there are 25 kids in a classroom, there may be 15 with behavioural problems. I am past being shocked, although I know that people out there don't understand."

She recalled the children who had failed to turn up for school during England's first match in the World Cup last year. Some of their parents had insisted that the children were right to stay at home. "They thought football was more important than school. The trouble is that education is a middle-class value which we are trying to operate in a working-class culture."

Abbeydale Grange draws its children from a wedge of deprivation, which takes in the Sharrow area where unemployment is the highest in the city, 30% of children come from families on income support, 12% of the adults are diagnosed as suffering from depression and 25% of the children live in homes officially deemed to be overcrowded.

Fifty three per cent of the school's students claim free school meals: on national trends, a further 10% would be poor enough to qualify but fail to lodge the claim. The poverty invades the school like water

flooding a ship, reaching into every weak point. Poverty often means parents who gained nothing from school and expect nothing more from it for their children.

Headteachers and officials at the town hall agree that in the old public housing estates, education has never been highly valued. Until the early 1980s, that was because there were apprenticeships more or less on demand in the coal and steel industries. Now, Sheffield's traditional economy has been destroyed, 60% of the old industrial jobs have been lost for ever, and the reasoning is reversed: last year, one out of every five young people who left Sheffield's schools had no work to go to, and one out of nine of them had no qualifications.

Overwhelmingly, those young people came from the old estates where they remain now, as the neighbours - and role models - of this year's students.

Poverty steers children off course long before they reach secondary school. Of the 115 11-year-olds in last term's year 7 at Abbeydale Grange, 25 of them arrived at the school with a reading age of less than eight. Their non-verbal reasoning scores were just as low. The effect on the rest of their schooling is catastrophic.

Many of the deprived children come from families of recent immigrants who do not speak English as their first language. Of the 521 pupils in the school last term, 204 are from the Indian subcontinent, together with children from Colombia, Brazil, Somalia, Venezuela, Kosovo, Senegal, Portugal and China. Half of the pupils in years 7 and 8 are in the process of learning English. In years 8 and 9, the position is even more difficult, with 70% of students adapting to English as a second language.

Poverty does its worst damage with the emotions of those who live with it: parents who are too tired or depressed, too stretched trying to juggle too many young children, too damaged to cope; children whose development is distorted from their earliest days. Forty five per cent of the students at Abbeydale Grange are classified as having special educational needs, many of them suffer from emotional or behavioural problems. Twelve per cent of them have a need so serious that they are "statemented" by the local authority as cases requiring the involvement of outside agencies: IQ as low as 50, very short concentration, hyperactivity, disruptive behaviour, attention-seeking, dyslexia, clinical depression.

### **Fear of failing**

Josh suffers from a classic cluster of problems. He is 12, his father has not been seen for years, his stepfather cannot be bothered with him, his mother drinks and does not like him. She has called the school to complain about their sending home letters in praise of his better behaviour. Josh expects to make a mess of everything he touches and he spends his day in school avoiding work for fear of failing. There are children like Josh in every class in Abbeydale Grange.

So a school like this is logged as a failure, its academic results limping far behind the private schools and the state schools in rural towns and pleasant suburbs. Back on the bleeper patrol, however, a very different picture begins to emerge - signs of success, hidden beneath the surface of daily school life. During the night, it rained, and, as usual, the puddles on the flat school roof have leaked through to the modern languages room below. Now, there's a whole Spanish class roaming the corridors in search of a home. The Bleeper Man races down the corridor, finds an empty room, races back to the Spanish class but, before he can reach them, he finds a small girl wandering in search of a teacher who has failed to show up. He sends the girl to tell the Spanish class to go to the empty room, pops his head in the door of the class without a teacher and calms the children, gallops down the stairs to the staff room, finds the name of the missing teacher on the rota, heads to the school office who have no idea where he is, charges back up stairs, shepherding stray Spanish students as he goes, tells two boys to stop spitting and a third not to swear, grabs some litter off the floor, finds a spare teacher, sends him to the class who have lost theirs, checks that the Spanish class has found its home and sees that all is well, heads for the class without a teacher and sees they are still fooling around, discovers the spare teacher has gone to the wrong classroom, finds him, redirects him, takes a breath... and realises that all is well, all is quiet. He has created order.

### **Broken home**

While the outside world looks at the league tables and sees failure, for the teachers inside the school, life is thick with success.

One of the Bleeper Man's most regular customers was Catherine, who left the school this summer. She came from a violent and broken home and, from her first day was an almost constant source of disruption, walking out of classes, refusing to fit in, threatening violence against herself and others. The school attached a support assistant to her, designed a special timetable for her, allowed her to go to a quiet room to escape from her most worrying classes, drew up a contract for her behaviour, reviewed her progress every week, gave her counselling, liaised with her unstable home. And it worked.

Last summer term, she sat her GCSE exams. After five years of domestic turmoil and emotional pain, the school had no illusions at all about the grades she would get. But she sat them - decided it was worth the effort, decided to revise, decided to sit through them writing, decided to try. That is success.

When the Bleeper Man sees Josh in the playground being approached by two older boys on their way for a cigarette, and Josh turns them away, that, too, is success.

These are children who are so tough on the street that policemen won't go on their estates without back-up and flak jackets; yet a lone teacher deals with them 30 at a time. But that doesn't score points in the league tables. The same children who fail their standard assessment tasks (SATs) also write the school prospectus and sit on interview panels, with a power of veto, when the school hires new staff.

There is hidden success in sport - like the Abbeydale Grange football team who struggled to win matches but scored a city-wide record by playing for the five years of a school career without arguing with a single referee's decision. They were rewarded by Sheffield United, who invited them to use their ground at Bramall Lane to play their final match. There is social success, in the tumultuous combination of cultures in the playground without any kind of race hatred; in the rarity of bullying; in the sheer delight of the year 7 cricket team who have only tennis balls and four elderly bats for practice but who took on the local Birkdale prep school with their brand new kit - and thrashed them.

When a year 10 student passes GCSE maths a year early, when two year 9 students do it two years early, when a year 8 student does it three years early, that is straightforward academic success. Although none of it shows up in the official school tables which record only year 11 results.

The bell rings for the end of the last lesson. The Bleeper Man heads out to the driveway, where the children mill around the buses. The outside world is waiting to invade. Two young men with pimples and baseball caps start handing out advertising flyers for a free evening at a new nightclub in the city centre. The 11-year-old boys and girls grab the flyers and get on the buses. Two girls from year 7 hug each other tight and say goodbye for the day. A couple of boys slip away for a cigarette.

For years, Britain has been shovelling children into poverty - taking away their parents' work, cutting their family's welfare, embroiling them in a war against drugs which has plunged them into crime and violence, breaking up their communities - and now these children are in the schools, messed up, damaged and delinquent, shunted over the edge. A school with a poor intake is like an ambulance at the bottom of a cliff: sometimes, it can pick up the children and patch up the damage; most of the time, it's too late.

The point is not that governments should introduce a more sensitive measure of achievement like value-added tables. The point is much bigger: the vast majority of government interventions over the last 15 years have been built on the foundation that schools can be blamed for the failure of their children; if that foundation is essentially false, the whole structure of reform is wrong. Millions of pounds and a mass of energy have been poured into projects which at best succeed only partially and at worst, actively damage the schools they are claiming to help. Tomorrow, we disclose evidence that that damage is profound.

- To protect the privacy of children at Abbeydale Grange, most of their names and some minor identifying details have been changed.

- Nick Davies, 1998 British Reporter of the Year, specialises in social issues and crime. As well as writing for the Guardian he has worked for Granada's World in Action and the BBC. Jack Straw said of his last book, *Dark Heart*, a journey into the hidden society of crime and poverty in the UK: "This book should be required reading... it will shock many to the quick, that all this could be happening under their noses."