

WASTED

The betrayal of white working class and black Caribbean boys

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1. INTRODUCTION

'I didn't want this life. It just happened.'

Tuggy Tug was one of half a dozen 15 year old boys gathered on the street corner in Brixton, south London. He wore black trainers, a black track suit and a black cap beneath the hood. He was small for his age and the track suit so big, he appeared lost inside it. 'Everyone who bumps into us says sorry,' he boasted. Under his black hoodie, he wore a red one – in case he needed a quick change of identity. He was, he admitted, on the look out for someone to mug. 'I want no one recognising me when I about my business,' he explained. Despite being criminal, barely literate and violent, Tuggy Tug had important points to make.

His attitude to authority was straightforward. His young, single mother, far from disciplining him, 'listened' because he was 'bringing home the bacon' – up to £200 a day from running errands for older drug dealers. He had no respect for his school which he had all but stopped attending. 'The teachers don't even try. They only care about the wage at the end of the year,' he said dismissively. He went on, 'You can sit on the desk with your shoes off, your socks hanging out, on the phone, doin your ting [drug dealing] and the teachers won't give a toss.' He looked on education as a lie put around by the government to

entrap him into a life time of paying taxes and car fines. His friends nodded in agreement.

'If you do it the government way,' he pointed out, 'you will wait until you're 80 by the time you can buy a nice, decent track suit.' He paused for a moment, 'I probably be dead by then,' he conceded.

He was equally dismissive of the youth justice system. He was attending YOT (Youth Offending Team) but, he told me confidently, had sized them up, 'you got to know how to suck batty,' and had already got them, 'to write something good about me' for his next court appearance.

His heroes were the older drug dealers in his area, 'I know a man of 21 who owns five houses and he never went to school,' and rap stars. He judged himself by his lack of fear, willingness to use violence and the number of all important 'links' he had in order to pull off the next drug deal.

His methods might be criminal but his ambitions were those of millions of other 15 year old boys. After five years, he planned to go 'legit' and buy a house in the suburbs and play golf all day.

All this time he had been eyeing my watch. He now drew aside the man who had introduced us and suggested together they 'bang' me and steal it. 'Well,' shrugged the man, a former armed robber himself, 'He wants £1,000 to buy a Smart Car. He sees stealing your watch as a career move.'

Whatever our opinion of Tuggy Tug, his ambition stands as a rebuke. That middle-class dream of a house in the suburbs and golf at weekends is as distant a prospect for Tuggy Tug as becoming an astronaut for the rest of us. He is set on the path of social deprivation. Ahead is prison, death or, at best, a life time on benefits. His life is already wasted.

The crisis with our youth

All over the country boys like Tuggy Tug are failing to make the transition to manhood and a successful adult life. Their failure leaves them dangerously disengaged from society and its values. The head of Scotland Yard's Violent Crime Directorate, Barry Norman said, 'Serious youth violence is the biggest problem we have today in London – with the possible exception of terrorism. Nothing frightens people more, and when that violence takes place in a group setting, it is all the more shocking.'¹

Richard Taylor knows that danger at first hand. He described the 'catalogue of failures' that led to a gang of teenage boys killing his ten year old son, Damilola. These were, 'failures by the system to keep young people in school and off the streets, failure to prevent them from committing crime and failure by their mentors to give good direction and failure by the authorities to catch them sooner.'² As a list of what is going wrong for our youth, it cannot be bettered.

Those failing, points out Christine Gilbert, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Ofsted, in her third annual report, are overwhelmingly 'secondary pupils of White British and Black Caribbean background'. They are associated with 'the very lowest levels of economic achievement.'³ The 'impact of poverty is greater' on these two groups than on any other. White boys from low income families perform worst at school. Only 16% of white boys entitled to free school meals – the standard measure of deprivation – reached the expected standard of five A to C grades including

¹ *The Sunday Telegraph*, 12 August 2007.

² *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 2006.

³ Ofsted, *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector*, 2007/08.

English and maths. This was well below the national average for all students of 48% – itself hardly a figure to be proud of. A report from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills found only 16% of black Caribbean boys, went to university while only 6% of white boys eligible for free school meals go on to further education.⁴ The opportunities available to these children says Christine Gilbert, ‘fall well short of those available to others’. They remain on the outside, looking in.

Christine Gilbert is clear that, ‘with the right educational provision and social support’ young people from poor families ‘can reach high standards,’ and overcome ‘initial disadvantage to achieve personal success.’ So why, despite the billions spent by the government on this problem do their lives continue to be wasted?

Society has changed dramatically over the last 40 years. The institutions that previously socialised and directed young men – the family, the church and school – have either lost or given up their authority. These changes have hit boys from disadvantaged backgrounds hardest.

Society has always had an ambiguous relationship with its young men. In times of war, we value their aggression, their sense of immortality, their loyalty to one another. But in peacetime, they are at best a nuisance, at worst a threat. How that threat is channelled has tested societies throughout history. But in contrast to the thoughtful rituals of the past, we now leave our boys to scramble up any old how.

In their place, boys like Tuggy Tug have created their own rites of passage – as feral and murderous as anything out of William

⁴ DIUS, *The gender participation gap in English Higher Education*, June 2008.

Golding's novel, *Lord of the Flies*. At the end of that book, an adult appears to restore order. In real life, grown ups are too often absent or ineffectual. Nor, unlike previous generations, do rebellious youths grow out of it. What happens in their teenage years, smashes their lives. This comes at great cost to society and the young men themselves. The majority find themselves trapped in an extended, semi-criminal adolescence well into their twenties and thirties. They remain anti-social, out of work and dependent on welfare. They are unable to uphold what we value as a society or pass those values on to their own children.

A former burglar described how he dropped out of school at 14 and received his first prison sentence at 18. Now in his thirties, he lives in a hostel and supplements benefits with drug dealing. He said sadly, 'I may be out of prison but there is no way out for me.'

A young man in his twenties living on benefits in Kent said, 'There are things you don't know at 14. You need someone to tell you if you do this at fourteen you will be happier. Your life will be better. They should have more power to make you. I am really trying now but it's so f*** hard because it is just too late.'

A young man in his twenties from a notorious estate in Newcastle said, 'I didn't want this life. It just happened.'

The latest official figures shows numbers of young idle men are soaring. The recession is triggering a surge in the number of young people aged between 16 and 24 who are Neets (Not in Education, Employment or Training). They are now at a 16 year high. In England 16% of 16-24 year olds – that is 935,000 – are Neets. According to figures from the Local Government Association that figure is soon expected to top one million for

the first time.⁵ And those who have failed at school are likely to be particularly badly affected. 39% of those with no GCSEs are not in education employment or training at 16, compared to 2% of 16 year olds who had adequate GCSE results.

This lost generation of unemployed young people is costing the taxpayer £90 million a week.⁶ Youth unemployment loses £10 million every day in productivity to the economy and £20 million every week in Job-seekers Allowance. The life time cost of educational under-achievement will be £18 billion.

Matina Milburn, the chief executive of the Prince's Trust, the charity created by the Prince of Wales in 1976 to help excluded children said, 'This problem is creating a huge economic cost to society... the true cost is probably even larger. If a young person gets on benefits and stays there they are always going to be a drain on the economy.'⁷ She said the cost was hidden by the strength of the economy. That was two years ago. Today that cost is no longer hidden or affordable.

Nor is it just cost. Young men with nothing else to do, no other way of proving themselves or making a living, take to crime. In 2004, the estimated total cost of youth crime in Great Britain was in excess of £1 billion.⁸

Gangs of youths are one of the biggest fears of the public. They are right to be fearful. A study by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) shows that knife-point robberies have

⁵ *TES*, 7 August 2009.

⁶ LSE, *The Cost of Exclusion*, April 2007.

⁷ *The Times*, 10 April 2007.

⁸ LSE, *op. cit.*

doubled in the last two years from 25,500 in 2005 to 64,000 in the year to April 2007. The CCJS figures mean that, on average, in the past year there were 175 knife robberies a day on the streets of England and Wales.⁹ One in 20 males has carried a knife in the last 12 months while just over a fifth of young people aged from 10 to 25 have committed at least one of four anti-social behaviours.¹⁰ Violent crimes carried out by children and teenagers have increased by one-third over three years. The number of under-18 year olds convicted or cautioned over violent offences jumped by 37% over the same period. Robberies went up by 43%. By contrast adult convictions and cautions increased by less than 1%.

Increasingly, the public is identifying moral decline, violence, anti-social behaviour and civil disorder with young people. They are flummoxed and frightened by the inability of the criminal justice system to deal with violent youths. At the trial of five teenagers accused of her husband's murder, Helen Newlove described how police failed to do tackle local gangs despite numerous complaints from residents. Even when they are arrested, more than a half are let off with a caution. The young man convicted of beating to death Garry Newlove was a repeat, violent offender.

It is not just the violent incident. Youth disorder represents a failure of adults to discipline and socialise the next generation.

This has a far reaching effect on people's lives. In 2004/05, according to analysis in an excellent IPPR report, more than seven million people felt that 'young people hanging around' was

⁹ *The Guardian*, 20 August 2007.

¹⁰ S Roe and J Ashe, *Young People and Crime: findings from the 2006 Offending Crime and Justice Survey*, Home Office, 2008.

a problem more or less all the time in their area.¹¹ More than two million felt this had a significant impact on their quality of life.

Fear means adults are less ready to intervene and monitor young people than in the past – or in other European countries. 65% of Germans and 50% of Italians, for example, would be willing to stop a group of 14-year-old boys vandalising a bus shelter – but only 34% of Britons.¹² Of those who refused to get involved, 39% feared they would be physically attacked by the boys. 14% were scared of later appraisals and 12% of verbal abuse. They are right to be afraid. One young man described how his gang had waited six months to take revenge on a middle aged neighbour who had shoved one of them for sitting on his garden wall. ‘We got him behind the supermarket and beat the shit out of him.’

The three catastrophes: no role models, bad schools, no jobs

So what lies behind the violent rule of teenage boys like Tuggy Tug? What forces have put them in charge of our streets? And how are we to deal with them?

I have spent nine months interviewing black Caribbean and white working class teenagers as well as men in their twenties and thirties from disadvantaged backgrounds around the country. I have also interviewed youth club leaders, teachers, community leaders and charities. Teenagers do not exist in a vacuum. So I have looked at the years coming up to adolescence and the repercussions in later life. I have also investigated the institution in which they spend the majority of their time – school. As well as ones in the UK, I have visited

¹¹ J Margo and M Dixon, *Freedom's Orphans: rising youth in a changing world*, IPPR, 2006.

¹² *Ibid.*

three of the new American Charter Schools who cater to disadvantaged young people in the Bronx and Harlem.

Whether black or white, from Brixton to Liverpool, the same three factors are having a catastrophic effect on our young men.

Young boys need adult males to emulate and validate them. But these important role models are all too often missing from their lives. In the last 25 years the number of children living in lone-parent households has more than doubled, to 3.2 million. Half of lone mothers have never married.¹³ In schools it is the same story. The number of male teachers has slumped to its lowest level for at least twenty years. 85% of primary school teachers are female. At secondary level, men make up around 43% of teachers compared to 54% in 1986. Since men are more likely to be heads or deputies, the number of men actually in the classroom is even smaller.¹⁴

A survey of 1000 parents in January 2009 by the Children's Workforce Development Council discovered that one in six children living with a single mother spends less than two hours a week with a male role model whether a father figure, relative or teacher. One in three of the children enjoys such contact for under six hours a week.

¹³ J Kirby, *The Price of Parenthood*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005.

¹⁴ Hansard, 20 April 2009.

The troubled teenager fares no better. Two thirds of staff in YOTS are women.¹⁵ For many boys their first experience of spending time with adult males is when they enter prison.

‘Back in the Caribbean we were taught the three Rs’

The second major factor is education. Between 2000 and 2007 education spending has risen by 75% but GCSE results rose by only 9%. During the same period almost 4 million pupils left school without gaining the basic qualifications of five good GCSEs including English and maths. Nearly a million pupils left with less than five GCSEs of any grade including English and maths.¹⁶

Nearly every one of the teenagers I interviewed and quite a few of the men in their twenties and thirties could not read or write – or had only learnt in prison. They are not the exception. Last year more than a third of 14 year old boys had a reading age of 11 or below. More than one in five boys has a reading age of nine. Almost 250,000 – 40% started GCSE studies without the mastery of reading, writing and maths needed to cope with the course.

White working class boys are most at risk of under-performing with 63% unable to read and write properly at 14 compared to 43% of white girls from a similar background. Black working class boys do not do much better. Just over half of them, 54%, can not read or write properly at 14.¹⁷

¹⁵ Dr R Golding and J McClory, *Going Ballistic, Dealing with guns, gangs and knives*, Policy Exchange, 2008.

¹⁶ See www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000768/revisedGCSE2008sfrtables.xls

¹⁷ *The Daily Mail*, 13 August, 2007.

A black car mechanic now in his fifties said sadly, 'Back in the Caribbean we were taught the three Rs but that's now gone out of the window,' He went on, 'black and white kids born in this country leave primary school and they can't read and write. After that everything breaks down.'

This was certainly true of the young men I interviewed. Their school days followed a similar pattern. They were not taught to read or write properly by seven. Unable to understand what was going on, humiliated in lessons, taunted by other children but desperate to prove themselves at something, they began to misbehave in the last two years of primary school. At secondary school, their behaviour deteriorated. 'I was embarrassed by my reading,' said one man now in his twenties from Nottingham, 'So I became the class clown.' Another from Streatham said of his secondary school, 'Why did them teachers keep askin me questions? They knew I couldn't read but they keep on askin. So I stopped goin to school.' They either played truant or were excluded. By 14, the age when boys drop out or are excluded, most were into crime and drugs – only turning up to school to sell drugs or stolen goods.

Illiteracy is a life sentence. It is not surprising, therefore, that, according to the Prison Reform Trust, in 2008, 48% of the prison population had a reading ability below that expected of an 11 year old. Bigs, a former leader of one of Brixton's most notorious gangs, received his first prison sentence at 15. He said, 'Other people go from school to university. We go from school to prison. I thought I would be dead by 30'.

The third factor is the change in the job market. The loss of manufacturing and the growth of immigration has hit white and black working class boys particularly hard. This is compounded by the effect of benefits.

Forty years ago, a young man could leave school at 16, get a job in a factory and at 19 support a wife and child. From his comfortable home in Brixton, the middle aged car mechanic listed the factories that had provided him and his friends with apprenticeships and work. They are all gone. In the two decades since 1982 manufacturing employment has declined by 34% and service employment grown by 20%. These newly created jobs in the service sector require personal and social skills alien to the majority of teenagers I interviewed – but at which girls excel. In the North East, for example, the men are on benefits while women monopolise the expanding public and service sector jobs.

The lack of these skills hits teenage boys almost as hard as the lack of literacy. Unlike their middle class counterparts no one had taught them the basics like shaking hands, speaking clearly or looking a grown up in the eye. Understanding what they were trying to say often took two or three attempts.

I needed a translator for some. This put the brightest at a disadvantage to their middle class counterparts. For even if presented with an opportunity, they lack the capacity to take it up. One teacher in an inner-city school considered this, 'a massively serious issue.' He went on, 'I have really gifted black boys who can't communicate. You see them struggling. It is quite often the reason they get really upset and frustrated.' Yet he thought it 'patronising' to try and correct them.

While we are failing to teach social skills to young boys, so they have become crucial for getting a job – in particular that all-important first job – as a recent survey of nearly 75,000 companies demonstrated. Nearly 40% of British employers reported shortages in customer handling skills and around 35% in oral communication and team-working skills. Employers felt the

lack most in elementary rather than higher level occupations. This shift in the job market, has had a particularly adverse effect on young men from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This leaves working class black and white boys particularly vulnerable to the other major change in the job market – immigration. The arrival of large numbers of skilled, capable immigrants willing to work for low pay has hit them hard and left them side lined. According to the ONS, of the 1.7 million new jobs created since 1997, 81% have gone to foreign workers. The DWP is clear why this is. UK citizens are on the dole because of ‘issues around basic employability skills, incentives and motivation.’¹⁸ It is a pity they have not passed this insight onto the Department for Children, Families and Schools.

One young man explained how these issues had come together to affect his life. Dave failed to learn to read, dropped out of school at 14 and joined a gang. Now he yearns for ‘a decent job’ and a home for his girl friend and baby daughter. At 22, his change of attitude has come too late. Lack of schooling has left him qualified for only menial jobs. These are hard to come by in the seaside town where he lives. He explained, ‘When the council advertised two dustmen jobs, there were 100 applications.’ The local job agencies told him he had no chance because ‘I was English,’ They only took Poles onto their books. He explained, ‘Poles do all the jobs around here.’

When he finally did manage to secure a job for the minimum wage, he encountered the third problem facing young men – benefits. Two 18 year olds hanging around a market square in

¹⁸ S Lemos and J Portes, *The impact of migration from the new European Union Member States on native workers*, DWP, 2008.

Norfolk explained the issue, 'We don't like having nothing to do,' they complained, 'We want to work but they pay the immigrants around here £3 a hour and we can't work for that.'

The majority of young men I interviewed, far from being 'work shy' were eager to work but prevented by the prospect of losing their benefits. The welfare system hands out more in benefits, in particular housing benefit, than they can possibly earn. It makes no financial sense for them to take a job paying the minimum wage. Dave was actually told by the financial advisor at the Job Centre not to take the job he had been offered. He explained, 'I would have had to pay my rent, council tax and utility bills and lost my benefits. At the end of the day I would have been £30 worse off. Most of the seaside towns round here have the same problem.'

At the same time the catering trade alone has recruited 10,000 workers from outside Europe to work in kitchens or as porters or back of house staff – all jobs the young men I interviewed could have done, despite their illiteracy, if it were not for losing their benefits.

Teenage boys from disadvantaged backgrounds disengage from society for a reason. They see nothing in it for them. And in this they are quite right. Semi-literate, in competition with skilled and motivated immigrants, they are not qualified for well paid jobs and the benefit system excludes them from taking low paid work as a first step to something better. The recession is now compounding their failure. More and more young men are finding it difficult to take those first steps to an independent, adult existence. Dave described his despair at the prospect of a life time dependent on benefits. He saw clearly his future, 'I know men of 40 doing nothing but drink and drugs all day. I don't blame them,' he shook his head angrily, 'But it's too early for me. I don't want to be beat like that.' Unfortunately he is.

Can things get better?

A recent study has placed Britain last in a table of 54 countries for social mobility.¹⁹ In January 2009 Gordon Brown made a renewed plea for social mobility, calling it a 'national crusade' and a 'great moral endeavour.' He is contemplating making discrimination on the grounds of class as illegal as on race and sex.

This is to miss the point. Social mobility is not going to be fixed by a national crusade or legislation. The problem lies in our schools, over which Gordon Brown has had control for the last 12 years. Spending on education has risen dramatically since Labour came to power from £2,910 per pupil in 1997 to £5,080 in 2007 but these large sums have failed to reach those children most in need.²⁰ Sir Terry Leahy, Tesco's chief executive and a member of Gordon Brown's Business Council for Britain, put it bluntly, 'Too many children have been leaving school after 11 or 13 years of compulsory education without the basic skills to get on in life and hold down a job.' He said five million adults were functionally illiterate and 17 million could not add up properly. On the job training could not act as a 'bandage or a sticking plaster' for, 'the failures' of our education system.'

In 2007 the CBI/Pertemps employment trends survey showed 52% of employers were dissatisfied with 16 year olds' grasp of basic literacy, with a similar percentage (50%) unimpressed by their basic numeracy.²¹ Young people, they complain, are

¹⁹ L. Woessmann, *How Equal are educational opportunities? Family Background and Student Achievement in Europe and the US*, CESifo Working Paper, 2004.

²⁰ C Skidmore, *The Failed Generation: The Real cost of Education under Labour*, Bow Group, 2007.

²¹ *The Guardian*, 20 August, 2007.

inarticulate, unable to communicate concisely, interpret written instructions or do simple mental calculations. That about sums up the majority of young men I interviewed. As Sir Terry concluded, 'At a human level, they represent a terrible waste of potential, limiting social mobility and reducing opportunity.'

A lack of social mobility goes together with a lack of aspiration. Boys from disadvantaged backgrounds do not aspire to a different life because they cannot imagine it. They lead isolated lives confined to a few streets or an estate. Many of the pupils, for example, of Bartley Green School on the western edge of Birmingham, have never visited the countryside, an art gallery or even Birmingham city centre.²²

One young man in Brixton had never crossed the Thames because he could not read the bus signs. Another in Newcastle compared growing up on his estate to growing up on 'a little island. You think that's how the rest of the world behaves but it's not.' The Head of Careers at a school in Dagenham described his pupils as 'very estate-centric and reluctant to travel far.' He found 'trying to get them onto a bus to travel a couple of miles for work experience is difficult enough.' He went on, 'It is a tough estate but it's the one they know and a kind of protective blanket.' When I asked a boy in Peckham how he planned to spend his summer he shook his head. Not for him the beach, a summer camp or even the local park. He explained he would be staying put in his room. 'There are too many people out there after me.'

These young men even lack the ability to get a good deal from the one institution they do know – the state sector. At a job

²² D Mongon and C Chapman, *Successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils*, NUT/National College for School Leadership, November 2008.

centre in Streatham a number of young men had brought along their girl friends to speak on their behalf. 'I always blow my top,' admitted a muscular teenager in a white T shirt and a gold chain. In this situation, isolated, confined and ignorant, is their lack of social mobility really so surprising?

That opportunity exists in this country is clear from the experience of many recent Eastern European immigrants. One young Pole I interviewed for a previous report was then sharing a room in Ealing, barely able to speak English and working for the minimum wage. Four years later, he has opened a beauty salon in St John's Wood. But then, as Dave pointed out bitterly, 'The Poles have not been through our education system.' No doubt when their children do, they will have the same problems as our black Caribbean and white working class boys.

While so many young people continue to emerge from school with so little to show for it, child poverty and social immobility are here to stay. We have failed to provide a safe, disciplined and principled environment in which young men can relax, find themselves and channel their best efforts. Instead we have relegated many of them to a ghetto of violence and despair.

The results stare us in the face. Our inner cities are scarred by the rise in crime and drugs amongst black youths. Our political life has been transformed by the election of two members of the BNP to the European parliament. BNP voters, according to a survey of more than 30,000 voters by YouGov for Channel 4 News, are young, white, working class males. 'Working class' is an optimistic description. These young men are not working – and probably never will. The survey showed they are anxious about money (just 25% say they have enough money on which to live comfortably compared with 47% of voters generally) and insecure over their future. A mere 19% are 'confident that my

family will have the opportunities to prosper in the years ahead.' We ignore these young men at our peril.

No government can do much, in the short term, about the loss of manufacturing jobs or the breakdown of families. But any government can tackle the crisis in our schools and the perverse influence of our benefit system.

In a world recession and with unparalleled levels of debt can we continue to waste so many of our young men's lives? Can we afford to sideline them straight from school into a life time on benefits and crime? Instead should we not concentrate on making them as skilled and motivated as the immigrants now taking their place?

2. SINGLE MOTHERS

'Bang she gets pregnant'

Prince, a coke dealer and father of five children by three different women, describes what happens. We were sitting in his flat on an estate in Peckham, south London. Half the rooms were empty with bare boards and exposed pipes. In contrast, the sitting room was decorated with cream, leather sofas and a plasma TV. Designer clothes hung on a coat rail in his bedroom. During the interview Prince was counting out 'sweeties', ecstasy tablets for his night's work on the coffee table. Over the front door, as a precaution against drug rivals, he had slung a machete. His customers were young, white, middle-class professionals.

Dressed in Gucci trainers and sporting a single diamond ear stud, Prince explained how he became a father. He would start seeing a woman. Two weeks in and, 'bang she gets pregnant'. There is no discussion about it. As far as he is concerned they are barely an item – let alone a family. They are certainly not living together.

He laid the blame squarely on benefits. 'Women get money from the government. Men get eradicated. What do you need a man for? The government has taken our place. I am old-fashioned, from the ghetto, and I am serious for my kids. But the

government is the provider now. When we were young, it was trendy at one stage to have lots of baby mothers. You think it's not going to affect you? Of course it affects you. You see your child suffer and it mashes you up.'

The figures bear him out. Single motherhood is an attractive proposition. Britain has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe. In 2003, 90% of births to mothers under 20 occurred outside marriage. Two young men from council estates as far apart as the south coast and the north east insisted that girls giving birth at 16 or 17 was no longer the exception in their area but the norm. One said, 'They only go down that path because not too many paths are open to them. By 18 or 19, they've got two kids.'

To accuse these young girls of being feckless is unjust. They are merely responding to the economics of the situation. They are as much victims of the crisis in our schools and the perverse influence of benefits as teenage boys. They have grasped the consequences of our poor education system. Whereas boys take to crime, girls get pregnant.

What future is there for a girl who graduates without a qualification? Skilled and hard working Eastern Europeans monopolize menial jobs. The next step up – a job, for example in catering or hairdressing – pays about £10,000 a year before tax. This is slightly more than a girl with two children receives in benefits but does not include somewhere to live rent-free. One 16 year old single mother explained on a phone-in, 'Everyone told me a baby was going to ruin my life. But I don't have a life to ruin. Aspiration is the best contraception.'

What business, for example, is going to employ a woman like Karen Matthews and pay her £15,600 after tax? Sir Norman Bettison, Chief Constable of West Yorkshire police, the force

responsible for bringing Karen Matthews to justice, put it starkly, 'We are talking here about the perverting influence of welfare. The more kids you have, the more money you get.' Nor does it include the extras they receive from the fathers of their various children. As Prince pointed out, 'All those little trainers and bikes, £50 here, £40 there. If I had no child I would be a rich man now.'

Many single mothers are excellent parents. But the situation created by the government is on a different level altogether. They have put young girls in a position where the only career open to them is to have children –whether they want to or not, whether they are good mothers or not. The state has taken over the role of both husband and employer.

When she is here, I never have weapons or pills lying around.

In this situation, what chance has a young boy of having that all important relationship with his father? Four out of ten children born in 2000 to single mothers had no contact at all with their father by 2003.²³

The consequence to the teenage mothers, their children and society is immense. Raising more than a quarter of the nation's children in single-parent homes is, apart from the social implications, very expensive. Nine out of ten are headed by single mothers (working mothers are mostly found in couple households).

The consequences to the children are even more dire. 72% of children of single mothers grow up in poverty.²⁴ Babies born to teenage mothers are 60% more likely to die in their first year than those born to other parents. Mothers of children on the 'at

²³ *Freedom's Orphans*, op. cit.

²⁴ *The Guardian*, 11 June 2007.

risk' register are five times more likely to be single, teenage mothers.²⁵ The Children's Society reports that 25% of all youngsters living in step-families run away before the age of 16. Many are younger than 11. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation discovered that children with one parent are more likely to have behavioural problems, do less well at school, have sex earlier, suffer depression and turn to drugs and heavy drinking. They are also, according to evidence from the US, more likely to get involved with gangs and crime.

Prince discovered two of his children were being neglected by their 19 year old mother. 'They were beautiful little kids but she had no standards. The house was like a crack house, dirty clothes everywhere. She fed them crappy food, she left the kids fall asleep in front of the TV. My boy was underweight and quiet.' Social services removed the children and gave them to their maternal grandmother to bring up. Prince said of his girlfriend, 'I have not seen any attempt by her to try and get back her children. She's lazy. She's never had a job. She's lived off the government and what men give her.' In order to keep her council flat, she is now pregnant by another man. He said of his six year old son, 'he's angry. It's hard to see a young kid that angry.'

Prince might be a drug dealer but he believed strongly in the power of a good education. He showed me a photograph of his eldest daughter by another woman. She was ten, dressed in school uniform and playing the piano at a school concert. Prince was paying for her to attend private school. That morning he had taken her to her first day of secondary school. 'The school's wicked,' he said. He thought the expense well worth it, 'They discipline the children. She learns the right values.'

²⁵ J Kirby, *Broken Hearts*, CPS, 2003.

He pointed to the coffee table and explained, 'When she is here, I never discuss business or have weapons or pills lying around. Estate people leave everything in front of their kids, knives, guns, their stach, the lot. Not me,' he nodded emphatically, 'I try and show her the right way.'

The Government has recognised the problem of single parenthood with a plethora of schemes. These intervene ever earlier in the life of the disadvantaged child. In other words, it has concentrated on the consequences of single parenthood but not the cause. It has not addressed the poor education on offer at too many of our schools nor the perverse incentive of benefits. This is self-defeating. What is the point of setting targets to end child poverty when its policies are creating tomorrow's poorest children?

Even government advisors acknowledge that the big increase in the number of lone-parent households over the last 20 years has been a major cause of child poverty. Between 1979 and 2003, the number doubled from 1.4 million to 3.2 million. The puzzle is why the government fails to act.

Single mothers see it differently. Simone is the mother of three boys from three different fathers – all well known criminals in her community. The sitting room of her council flat boasted a thick pile carpet, a large plasma TV and on the side table, a gold fish tank and empty bottle of Moët et Chandon champagne. The smell of dinner cooking filled the apartment.

Exhausted by school, Simone's seven year old son slept on the sofa beside her. Simone, an attractive, slender black woman in her thirties, was bouncing her baby on her lap. At the side table her 18 year old son, Dion, carefully folded up a pile of ironed clothes. 'He's a neat freak,' she said of him affectionately. Dion had recently been convicted of driving without a licence.

Simone was clear who she blamed for his predicament, his school and the lack of anything to do in the area – not the lack of a father. When asked about his father, Dion said, ‘I don’t know where he is. He’s never played a part in my life.’

Dion had begun truanting in Year 9. Simone said, ‘It is the school’s job to keep him in school. But they don’t. My job is to get him up in the morning and get him to school. There should be some way of holding him in.’ She went on angrily, ‘They never told me he wasn’t in school. They sent no note. They took no action. They didn’t even tell me to go to the social. Nothing.’

Now she did not know what to do with him. Dion refused to go to college, ‘I can’t sit in one place too long,’ he explained. Simone went on, ‘You talk and talk and talk until you tired of talking. I don’t want him to be a lawyer,’ she turned to him. ‘Just do your ting on the side (sell drugs) and have a job.’

She sighed. ‘He’s so full of potential and got such manners! Year 7 and 8 he took such pride in his uniform. He’s always been a ‘neat freak’.’ Dion without a word leant over and took the baby from his mother and began to play with it on his lap. His mother went on, ‘He’s not good with pen and paper. He likes to use his hands. If he had not been cooped up he would have been better. They should have got them out more, taken them away on holidays and at weekends. One day’s work experience would have helped.’

His mother complained about the lack of activities for teenage boys and the temptations of the streets. ‘There is no clubs for him to join.’ In their absence he spent ‘too much time’ hanging about with his friends. His mother went on, ‘It’s boring, they’re in each others face all the time. That where this violence comes from – boredom. One’s got better trainers than another and they kick off. Dion gets a lot of hassle for that because he cares for his stuff.’

I asked if she thought he lacked a father figure. 'Once upon a time I would have said it did not matter. Now I think it's important. You do need a man around. At least now I have learnt how to treat the next two. I am going to be a lot tougher. These two are in for it. I am going to be firm with them. If they start truanting, well there will be blood on the pavement.' The baby was now gurgling with delight at Dion. She started to talk about Feltham, the young offenders institute, as if Dion going there was a matter of course.

Simone was obviously a loving mother but she had never worked and had Dion at 16. It did not occur to her to take her son to the local college to sign up. She certainly knew no one in work to give him a helping hand. This is crucial because according to Christine Gilbert, he is unlikely to get it from school. The requirement to include 'work-related' and 'enterprise learning' in secondary schools has not 'yet been embraced wholeheartedly' by all schools. She went on, 'Indeed, it may be that pupils are more enthusiastic about the opportunities than some of their teachers.' The result, 'the most vulnerable young people' like Dion, not in education, employment or training 'is alarming and unacceptable. For these young people 'without a foot in the door to the world of work', it was 'frankly, hard to find encouragement from our inspection evidence.'²⁶

The contrast between Dion and a group of boys living on an estate 15 minutes walk away proved sharp. At first it seemed as if they shared a similar future to Dion. The seven boys, aged between 13 and 15, all wore hoodies and were jumping up and down on a garage roof, yelling and throwing things.

²⁶ Ofsted, *Annual Report*, 2006/07.

Once on the ground, the difference became clear. Unlike Dion, these boys, one Somali, one Iraqi, two white, two black and one mixed race, all had plans for the future. They could answer confidently what they would be doing in five years time. Mustapha explained he wanted to be a plumber because, 'most of my dad's friends are plumbers,' They were going to offer him work experience in Year 10. Raphael planned to be a PE teacher. 'When I finish my homework I go for a run.' At school he did two to three hours a week of rugby, cricket and tennis, 'There's not much after school,' he said regretfully and the middle class boys got picked for the team because of their private coaching. Hussain was going to be an engineer like his uncle. 'My dad drops me off at my uncle's most weekends and he shows me what he is doing.' Steve and Jamie, the two white boys, attended cadets about which they were enthusiastic. 'My dad's in the army,' said Steve, 'that helps loads.'

What effect did a father have? 'You want to follow in their footsteps,' they all agreed. Only Gabriel had been pushed by his mother. He planned to become an accountant and go to college. She had found him work experience. 'I went and I liked it. She motivates me a lot.' Cody was impressed by his mother's boyfriend who had come out of prison, failed to find a job and started his own scrap metal business. Cody hoped to work for him.

Other boys, they agreed, were not motivated by their parents. Their parents did not make an effort to find them activities, 'so they go out and follow bad boys.' Steve explained his dad kept him busy, 'because he does not want me getting into gangs. I could get seriously injured and hurt.' Raphael said, 'Everyone will give up on you but Dads don't give up on you because he's your dad.'

Biggs, black, in his late twenties and the former leader of one of Brixton's most notorious gangs, explained 'the big divide' with the

white boys in his class. At school they, 'had all started from the same place.' But when they began misbehaving at 14, the white boys he knew then had fathers to sort them out. Their dads would send them off, 'to my mate Gary who works with washing machines. He will give you a job.' The father of one young man, 'a nut case, a real live wire,' brought him to the cadets and told the colonel, 'I don't care what you do to my boy but he's going down the wrong road and needs straightening out.'

'If I had a father,' said a young white man from the north east recently released from prison, 'I would have got a good hiding and I probably not be here now.' His 17 year old friend, on the police list for top ten trouble makers in his local town, nodded, 'Yer need a dad for growing up.'

'School was a total let down for us.'

Teenagers spend the majority of their adolescence in school. School is crucial if they are going to emerge as confident young men ready to engage in society. Those boys with a chaotic family life need school to be a refuge and a contrast. They need school to provide authority, moral leadership, an outlet for aggression and to broaden their horizons.

School has the power to transform lives – even the most unlikely. Jason is from a town in the north of England where his family is notorious for drugs, violence and incest. Jason's father was a drug dealer. Drug addicts filled their home. Schizophrenics regularly dropped around to exchange their medication for drugs. Jason's earliest memory is learning to roll a spiff for his father. Against this home background, Jason and his siblings found school a welcome contrast. 'I did not miss a single day,' and joined everything it had to offer as well as the local choir and scouts. Jason is now training to be a teacher.

In the 2006/07 Ofsted report, nearly half of all secondary schools failed to achieve more than a 'satisfactory' rating. The relationship between poverty and outcomes for young people is, says Christine Gilbert, 'stark' and poses an 'unacceptable' risk to the life chances of disadvantaged children. She went on, 'It can't be right that 20% of youngsters leave primary schools without a foundation in literacy and numeracy.' Twice as many 11 year olds from poor homes failed to master English and maths compared to the national average. Youngsters from disadvantaged homes are five times more likely to fail to get five good A to C grades at GCSE than those from affluent backgrounds. Far from being the motor for social mobility, the state school system is entrenching deprivation. 'This cannot be right and we need to do more,' said Ms Gilbert.²⁷

Christine Gilbert is clear where the problem lies – with secondary pupils of White British and Black Caribbean background. They continue to form an underclass shut out of university and top jobs. The attainment of white British boys from poor homes remains 'particularly' low, 'blighting' their chance of a higher education – 'the key to social mobility.'²⁸

The Government's failure to improve standards in education has hit the poorest hardest. White British, for example, find themselves in competition with the children of recently arrived immigrants. Research from Manchester University in 2007 found money was being targeted at pupils with English as an additional language. 'White learners from highly disadvantaged backgrounds were reportedly often overlooked,' said the report. One local authority

²⁷ *The Independent*, 18 October 2007.

²⁸ Ofsted, *Annual Report*, 2007/08.

officer told researchers that ‘white poverty and underachievement aren’t as head line grabbing or sexy.’²⁹

Ms Gilbert saw clearly the consequences of this – the ‘alarming’ threat to thousands of youngsters roaming the streets without a job after quitting school at 16.

So what is it like to be a black Caribbean or a white working class male in the wrong half of our educational system? Why are they failing and how does it affect their lives and society?

²⁹ *The Daily Mail*, 1 February 2008.

3. PRIMARY SCHOOL

‘I was 14 before I could read a newspaper’

Jake is 22, bright, articulate and now living on benefits in the Midlands. He explained, ‘My main trouble was with my reading and writing.’ He went on, ‘There was nothing wrong with me. All I needed was someone to spend time one on one with me to get the basics. I did not know the basics.’ He never got that attention. ‘I was 14 before I could read a newspaper – before I understood what words meant.’

A black mother in Kilburn, concerned her seven year old son was not learning to read, walked into school one day. She saw her son and another boy rolling about on a mat while everyone else was getting on with their lesson. She said, ‘As far as the teacher was concerned she was not bothered. Everyone else was working.’

A failure to learn to read and write between the ages of five and seven has a far reaching and devastating impact on young men and society. As a leading psychologist, Keith Stanovich put it, ‘Slow reading acquisition has cognitive, behavioural, and motivational consequences that slow the development of other cognitive skills and inhibit performance on many academic

tasks.’ The longer this continues, ‘the more generalised the deficits will become, seeping into more and more areas of cognition and behaviour.’³⁰ Or as a tearful nine year old put it, ‘Reading affects everything.’

In secondary school Jake noticed about 10% of his year, 10 to 14 boys out of a hundred ‘behaved badly because we could not read or write.’ Jake has more perspective than most because he had a brother in the year below, ‘and it was the same in his class – 10 or 12 lads causing trouble because of their problems with literacy.’ It puzzled him. If he could see the relationship, ‘Why couldn’t the school? Why were we given no help?’

It has not been clear which comes first, the illiteracy or delinquency or when the problem occurs. The majority of teenagers I interviewed began to misbehave at around seven or eight – the years by which they should have learnt to read. Jake recalled getting into fights at his primary school from the age of eight. He was punished by being made to go and stand in the hall. It was ‘a totally useless punishment,’ he recalled, ‘I would forget about it the next day.’

Their experience is backed up by research of 2,200 twins by King’s College and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.³¹ It revealed that reading and behaviour problems cause each other in boys at a very young age. In girls, however, aggressive behaviour and reading failure were ‘extremely rare’. Five year old boys who had a small vocabulary, were inarticulate and found reading difficult, behaved increasingly badly. They bullied other

³⁰ Quoted in T Burkard, *After the Literacy Hour*, CPS, 2004.

³¹ This findings were detailed in *Child Development*, January/February 2006. See also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4693712.stm>

children, told lies and stole things. 'To our surprise,' said Professor Terrie Moffitt, co-author of the research, 'neither genetics nor environment alone – a young, single mother, deprivation, maternal depression even child neglect – explained the link.'

How to solve the problem was straightforward. What happens in the class room has the power to transform boys. 'Targeting either reading problems or behaviour problems during the pre-school and early primary school years is likely to produce changes in both behaviours... several studies illustrate the positive affect academic interventions can have on children's antisocial behaviour... It's what goes on in the classroom, and this is important because it can be changed.'

An Ofsted inspector agreed. 'It is crucial for the future development of these young boys to get them to read and write by the age of seven.' Without literacy their lives are finished before they start. Ahead stretches years of boredom, shame and failure. A lack of literacy drives angry and resentful boys out of school and into trouble.

Why when failing to learn to read has such damaging effect on young boys does it continue to happen? The Government is aware of the importance of literacy. In 1998 it launched the Literacy Hour. Ten years ago a six year old Tuggy Tug was starting the new Literacy Hour at his primary school. How successful has it been?

According to the Government's own figures – not very. In the SATs taken by some 600,000 14 year olds last spring, 36% failed to reach the expected levels. Despite the Literacy Hour and a massive increase in spending on education, a third of 14 year olds has a reading age of 11 or below. One in five has a reading age of nine.

This is an extraordinary high level of failure. After all learning to read is a routine business managed by countries a lot poorer than ours. Cuba, Estonia, Poland and Barbados all, for example, boast higher literary rates than the UK despite having a Gross National Income per person of less than half of the UK and despite spending far less on education. We would not accept a third of all routine flights across the Atlantic to crash or a death rate of one in three patients from an everyday operation. So why do we accept it from schools?

‘The pupils are working together, directing their own learning’

In the last 30 years what goes on in the classroom of our state schools has changed dramatically. The social revolution of the 1960s had its counterpart in education. A new breed of educator dismissed didactic teaching, discipline, sitting in rows, learning by rote as old fashioned and stultifying. Instead they introduced ‘child centred’ learning.

How has this affected the disadvantaged boy in the classroom? The National Institute of Economic and Social Research compared teaching methods between England and Switzerland.³² In Switzerland the teacher spent two thirds of class room time, teaching the whole class. In England teachers seemed almost embarrassed to teach. ‘For most of the time pupils are left to their own resources. The teacher’s role is mainly to help individual pupils when there are difficulties and to check their work.’

The problem came when pupils wanted help at the same time. They spent, as one child told me, three quarters of the lesson queuing at the teacher’s desk – doing no work, learning nothing

³² J Bartholomew, *The Welfare State we’re in*, Politico’s, 2004.

and bored out of their minds. The teacher has little time for more than a cursory glance at a child's work. The report concluded, 'Average pupils, and more so those who are below average, consequently suffer.' The researchers were struck by the difference between England, with its 'long tail' of under-achieving pupils and Switzerland, where most pupils kept up so well it was 'a revelation'.

Middle-class parents of children at state schools are able to make up the deficit of 'child centred' learning with private tutoring. An Ipsos Mori poll for the Sutton Trust discovered recently more than one in five teenagers at state secondary school, for example, have had a private tutor to help them with school work.³³ The figure rises to nearly half of pupils in London. With fees of £30 an hour or more, this is simply not an option for many families. The boy from the disadvantaged background loses out.

This attitude towards education permeates every aspect of state schools – down to the way a class room is organised. I saw the results for myself when I sat in on a class for a week in a primary school in the East End. Unlike the highly effective Charter Schools I had visited in Harlem and the Bronx, which had children seated at desks in rows facing the teacher, these children were seated at tables scattered about the room.

On my table, the three children were giggling, kicking each other and chatting. Their attention lay on what was immediately in front of them – themselves. Somewhere on the periphery of our vision, the teacher walked about struggling to keep order. Somewhere else, behind our heads, hung a white board with

³³ *The Guardian*, 11 June 2009.

work upon it – gleefully ignored by my table. When I blamed the lay out for the poor discipline and concentration, the teacher looked at me with horror. ‘The pupils are working together, directing their own learning,’ she said emphatically. Had I not appreciated what was going on?

The educational establishment emphasizes what ought to work. It does not investigate or accept the evidence of what actually works. As one science teacher in the East End of London remarked, ‘I am instructed to put into place educational initiatives for which there is no educational evidence whatsoever.’ Another complained, ‘Education is an evangelical movement. Evidence has nothing to do with it.’ This has a disastrous effect on academic achievement, particularly of boys from a poor background. Faced with a child who is incapable of directing his own learning, teachers and psychologists will question what is wrong with the child – not what is wrong with the teaching. The casualties of an education system based on wishful thinking fill our prisons and benefit queues.

Nowhere are these wars more bitterly fought than over reading methods. And no where are the casualties higher – boys from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Teaching someone to read is not difficult. It does takes patience, effort and a lot of one-to-one attention. Most children – about 75% – learn to read whatever the method. The bottom quarter, disproportionately children from poor homes, is more intractable. Evidence has piled up both here and in the US that poor readers make better progress when taught with synthetic phonics. This is a remarkably simple method. Children are taught letter sounds and blending skills thoroughly before they are given books. It is only controversial because it depends upon direct teaching instead of the child learning through play.

Unlike most educational theory, compelling evidence exists that synthetic phonics works with that intractable 25% and is particularly successful with boys from disadvantaged backgrounds.³⁴ The results of a project in Clackmannanshire are striking, where 98% of pupils are able to read as a result of the synthetic phonics programme used there. In 2005, the children taught to read by synthetic phonics were 3.5 years ahead in reading than their expected age when they left primary school. But what stands out is the boys' success. Their results so startled the academic conducting the trial, she went back and checked again. These boys were four years ahead of their expected age in reading. They were even one year ahead of the girls.

Unfortunately, in the surreal world of education, success is not enough. However good the evidence, synthetic phonics is on the wrong side of the education wars. Phonics, like rows of desks, is considered old-fashioned and didactic. An Ofsted inspector explained, 'Many educationists dismiss it as too much rote learning. Learning has to be fun.'

Instead educationalists prefer variations on the whole-word method. They believe children should learn to read as they learn to speak – naturally. They will pick up the meaning of words from

³⁴ The work of Tom Burkard has shown how effective use of synthetic phonics can eradicate illiteracy. Burkard has been hailed by Shadow Education Secretary Michael Gove as "the man who has done more than anyone living in the fight against illiteracy in this country." He has demonstrated how synthetic phonics have been successfully adopted in Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire – at remarkably low cost. There, most children are reading independently by the first term of Reception Year. By contrast, after three years of the Literacy Hour, 31% of English seven year olds cannot read a simple children's story without help. See T Burkard, *The End of Illiteracy*, CPS, 1999, and *A World First for West Dunbartonshire*, CPS, 2006.

looking at pictures of things they know. They learn on their own instead of being told. It must all be easy and enjoyable. Or as the Ofsted inspector remarked, 'The child is put in a corner, surrounded by books and assumed to read by osmosis.'

One teacher with many years experience of teaching reading explains what actually happens. When the child comes across a new word, he has no means of decoding it. He must guess, from which he learns nothing, or join the queue at the teacher's desk. 'The busy teacher says the word and hopes the child will remember.' The child has to treat each new word like a Chinese ideogram and learn it by heart. This means reading the same story over and over again in order to memorize words. 'Practice at home,' she pointed out, 'is always necessary.'

And this is where the theory falls apart. This method is fine if time-consuming for children with involved, middle-class parents. It is a problem for children with parents unwilling or unable to hear their reading. They are never going to practise at home. Their parents, products of the same system, often can barely read themselves. No adult is going to make sure they learn every word by heart. This is why the Literacy Hour works for the 75% of children who would read however they were taught – but lets down the most disadvantaged child.

What did the government do? The results from Scotland put the government under increasing pressure to adopt synthetic phonics. It took its time. Only in June 2005 did Education Secretary Ruth Kelly announce that synthetic phonics would replace the old Literacy Hour. A year later the DfES put forward the new Framework for teaching reading. But the Government made a crucial mistake: it employed the same people who had been fighting synthetic phonics since 1998.

Unsurprisingly, these people merely advised that synthetic phonics should take, 'its place within a rich and broad early years curriculum.' Instead of using the teaching materials that had been so successful in Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire, they devised their own synthetic phonics programme, "Letters and Sounds". Ruth Miskin, a former head who has had remarkable success with synthetic phonics in her East End school called it, 'a mishmash of all sorts of methods – most of which weren't working for the most vulnerable kids – the worst of all worlds.' In other words it was a compromise to the educationalists in the reading wars rather than much needed reading reform for children from poor backgrounds.

Special Needs

The educational establishment has hidden failure by turning it into an industry. Once again, the consequences for the disadvantaged boy are disastrous.

Children with Special Educational Needs is a growing phenomenon. In 2002 about a fifth of primary school children, 19.2%, were registered as having serious learning difficulties. In secondary schools it is 16.5%. This phenomenon particularly affects boys. In one study of 9,799 children between to 7 to 15 years of age, 20% of the boys had reading disabilities compared with about 11% of the girls.³⁵ In 94 schools in the UK more than 50% of the children are registered by their teachers as having special educational needs. In 752 schools, it is between 35% and 50% of all pupils.

³⁵ M Rutter et al, "Sex Differences in Developmental Reading Disability", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 2004.

The experience of Antonia, a small, fine boned black woman from Kilburn was typical. Her son, Abraham aged 11, had problems with reading since primary school. She said, 'I couldn't get any help.' The teacher told her Abraham was doing fine. But he was having difficulties 'reading all the small words he should know. It was frustrating.' When she asked for him to be tested for dyslexia, she said, 'I get no one to listen to me at the school. His teacher said I was making too much fuss.'

It is not a uniform affliction. While some schools have almost half to three quarters of their children registered with learning difficulties, others have none. This happens not just with a particular year group but year after year. When Ruth Miskin was head of the Kobi Nazrul school in Tower Hamlets, she registered just five pupils (3%) of her children as having SEN. Yet her children come from the same catchment area as other Tower Hamlets schools which register 30%, 40% or even 55% as having Special Needs.

Her pupils were certainly from a disadvantaged background. Nearly 80% of the children at her school are Bangladeshi. English is their second language and some arrive at school hardly speaking any. In 1997, 63% qualified for free school meals and 70% of the children live in overcrowded households. Yet these children scored above the national average in reading, writing and maths. All the seven year olds at Kobi Nazrul were able to read. Successful readers appeared to avoid the SEN label.

Black and white working class boys are over-represented on special needs lists.³⁶ They in particular benefit from Ruth Miskin's system. 'Black boys,' she says learn to decode just as

³⁶ See www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR757.pdf

fast as any white middle-class girl' – if they are taught properly and have the encouragement of rapid success. Ruth Miskin has gone on to develop her own synthetic phonics programme. She is emphatic, 'Every child can be taught to read. And that's true whether they watch too much telly, play too many computer games, whether they have dyslexia, suffer from attention hyperactive disorder. It's true even if they have parents who don't read to them, or are new to English.'³⁷

Antonia eventually got her son reading when she took him to the Butterfly Literacy Schools run by the educational charity Real Action in Queen's Park, north Westminster, an area in the top 5% of the country for multiple deprivation. Up to 200 children learn how to read, write and spell using synthetic phonics. Katie Ivens who runs the classes on Saturday mornings said, 'We get outstanding results from children who live in the high crime estates around here.' Just 20 hours of teaching can add 14 months to their reading age.

A lot of the children, she explained, as well as not being able to read, are 'highly intelligent' and have behaviour problems. 'A combustible combination.' She went on, 'The good news is that we also find that the better they read, the better they behave.' She has them sitting in rows, 'As they learn to read and spell, competing eagerly to give the right answers, their demeanour, their articulacy and their performance all improve. Our star performers, by the way, usually include boys of Afro-Caribbean origin. Our methodology suits all children.'

³⁷ *The Times*, 21 October 2007.

4. SECONDARY SCHOOL

‘School shatters your dreams before you get anywhere’

In 2006/7 national tests revealed four out of ten children left primary school that year without a basic grasp of the three Rs. A quarter of a million pupils started secondary school without having mastered the skills of reading, writing and maths.

A young man from Newcastle described what it was like to be one of the one in ten boys who starts secondary school with the reading age of an average seven year old. ‘I was given no help. The school made up its mind about you in the first term. Not one teacher cared enough to do something about me.’

‘The numbers that are inadequate,’ says Christine Gilbert, ‘are far too many.’³⁸ Moreover education like health is subject to political pressure. External exams are high stake tests as much for ministers as pupils. Exams are too often about making ministers look good at the expense of the education of the child. Primary schools, or example, are judged by how many of their pupils meet the expected standard on the 11+ English SATs (National

³⁸ *TES*, 21 November 2008.

Curriculum Tests). Many will do anything to ensure their pupils meet that standard. A survey of 107 secondary teachers showed that 90% do not believe test score reflect pupils' true ability.³⁹ 80% believe they overstate the competence of some pupils. Teachers said they face pressure to 'prove' government initiatives are working. They devote hours drilling pupils to answer test questions. One wrote, 'It's like they're been prepared for an MOT – you can pass on the day but not the day after.'

The results may benefit the Government but it is disastrous for children – especially boys from a disadvantaged background. A teacher noticed one working class white boy often crying in the corridor. In class he played the clown. The teacher said, 'It took three weeks for me to realize he was not difficult or weird – just deeply failed.' The primary school 'had not told us he could not read and write.' Nor had they sent his SATS results. The teacher asked the boy why he had no exam marks from his last school. The boy explained he had been absent on the day of the test. The teacher went on, 'What's the chances of that not being deliberate on the part of the school?' They had failed to teach him then covered it up.

One 15 year old boy from Liverpool still unable to read or write properly explained the result, 'I done the SATS test but it did not show I needed help. My secondary school did nothing. They didn't understand I could not keep still in class because I did not know what was going on. So I got naughtier and naughtier,' until he was excluded from five different schools.

An Ofsted inspector said, 'the fact children pass their SATS does not mean they have good literacy.' One child, she recalled,

³⁹ A de Waal, *Fast Track to Slow Progress*, Civitas, 2008.

got marks just because she copied out the questions in neat handwriting. She believed, 'You must get the content of the tests right and they must be marked rigorously. Then teachers will teach them right.'

Many children fail to improve their poor literary skills even after three years of secondary education. In 2006, 729 comprehensives left one in five or more of their pupils to coast during the crucial initial years. Almost 150,000 pupils achieved the same grades or worse in national tests at 14 as they did in primary school exams three years earlier.⁴⁰ Far from helping these pupils, secondary schools are compounding failure. In 2008 more than one in five boys at 14 had a reading age of nine. After three years in secondary school, amounting to some 3000 hours of education, 10,000 of these boys scored lower marks in reading than in their final year at primary. As one young black criminal remarked, 'School shatters your dreams before you get anywhere.'

Why are so many secondary schools failing pupils? One reason is that school heads are forced to put the demands of the centre above the needs of their pupils. In the office of a secondary school headmaster, a series of elaborately coloured graphs covered the whole of one wall. He had put them up there for a reason. They proved to officials why some of his students had not made the expected progress. Despite impressive SATs at age 11, they had arrived from primary school taught to test but not much else. He lacked the staff or funds to help them catch up.

Instead he was concentrating on working a similar conjuring trick, or 'ducking and diving' as he put it, between exam boards in order to increase C grades at GSCE despite his semi literate

⁴⁰ *The Daily Mail*, 3 May 2007.

intake. He was particularly gleeful that morning. He had discovered an English GCSE that did not require his pupils to read a single poem or book. 'You have to be ahead of the game,' he said.

It is a dishonest game, played at the expense of pupils. One comparison makes that clear. Only 0.4% of British students score the top mark of 45 points at the International Baccalaureate while 25% of A level students get three A grades.⁴¹ One teacher on an educational forum admitted he switched all his economic candidates from one exam board to another and doubled the percentage of grade As. 'How?' he asked, 'do you think the 'tough' exam board reacted to its customers going elsewhere?' he went on bitterly, 'We have a smoke and mirrors system which suits the politicians nicely. Teachers have no choice but to play the game.'

Another reason is the sheer numbers of pupils who need help. One head of department in an inner-city school explained, 'We don't have the budget or the specialists to teach the majority of the first year of secondary school to read and write properly. We would have to take the money from somewhere else and change the time table.' A man who taught literary skills in a white suburban comprehensive remarked that 40% of the intake of his secondary school was 'at least' two years behind in reading or spelling or both. He worked out he had five minutes per week for every pupil who needed help. 'It was a miracle we were able to do anything at all.' A teacher at a school of largely white, disadvantaged children in Norfolk calculated that 55% of their intake was at least three years behind in reading and spelling.

⁴¹ *The Sunday Times*, 14 October, 2007.

The only way to get funding for illiterate youngsters is to get them statemented. This requires a folder of evidence and the parents' consent. Many parents naturally assume a statement means there is something wrong with their child – rather than wrong with the educational system – and they object. The teacher sighed, 'It's a lengthy process that can take 18 months. The boys don't get help with their reading and writing until half way through secondary school. By then it's too late.'

A science teacher in an inner London school said, 'I am so used to teaching 14 year olds who have a reading age of seven that I don't even think of it as strange anymore. It has become the norm rather than the exception.'

What is it like for a bright but illiterate 12 year old in our state system? In his first two years of secondary school, Jake was in the top maths and science set, 'But rubbish in everything else because of my lack of reading and writing. That kills you in every subject. Even in maths you need to be able to read the question.' He pointed out his school never drew the obvious conclusion and addressed the problem.

Jake and his friends hated being shown up in class, 'Basically you write in every lesson. So every lesson I would feel so big,' he paused to pinch his thumb and forefinger together, 'My English affected every subject.'

'I spend more time looking in children's lunch boxes than testing their literacy'

According to its website, the role of Ofsted, our education regulator, is to 'raise aspirations' and achieve, 'ambitious standards and better life chances' for pupils. 'Their educational, economic and social well-being will in turn promote England's national success.' Ofsted could indeed do much to improve

schools. As one Ofsted inspector explained, 'Schools will give the inspector what they want. If we could get Ofsted to inspect the right things the school will deliver and boys will learn to read.' So why with such worthy aims do the 'life chances' of so many teenage boys continue to be thrown away?

Christine Gilbert blames certain primary schools which continue to ignore the evidence that synthetic phonics works best – especially for disadvantaged boys. This is disingenuous. It is her inspectors who are not enforcing the rules, as one Ofsted inspector was shocked to discover. She asked her Lead Inspector why they were not checking the reading method used by the school. Was it synthetic phonics and how well was it being taught? Crucial questions any parent might think. Not the Lead Inspector. He shrugged and said, 'I don't ask the question.' No doubt it was contrary to his educational philosophy. The outraged inspector even wrote to complain to Ofsted itself but, 'I got fobbed off.'

Ofsted's lack of interest in these basic skills is clear from the school's own self-evaluation report. This is a 52 page document. Schools send teachers on special courses to learn how to fill it in. 'Schools even consider that a brownie point,' said one inspector in despair. The last she received was 48,000 words long, 'A sledgehammer to crack a nut,' she complained.

Out of those 48,000 words, how many dealt with literacy and numeracy in the school? – exactly 12 for one average school. Its literacy programme was summed up in a single sentence. 'School X promotes good basic skills, especially in Literacy, Numeracy and ICT.' The Ofsted inspector dismissed this as 'a piece of wish fulfilment'. She went on, 'It "promotes" but what does it achieve? It says nothing about achievement. This is just not good enough.'

Instead the Ofsted inspection concentrates on social welfare, behaviour and attendance 'all of which might not be a problem,' said the exasperated inspector, 'if the children had better reading and writing skills and could actually engage with the curriculum.'

Unfortunately Ofsted is subject to political pressure and ideological fads. Take the first item on the inspection list – progress of its learners. One Ofsted inspector said, 'We are besotted by progress.' Another said, 'There is too much emphasis on progress but not on the result. Too much of the report is based on what plans the school is making – not on what is actually going on, on the ground, in the class room.' The first shook her head, 'Schools are very good at putting plans down on paper which never come to fruition.' As long a school has made progress, it satisfies the inspector. But, pointed out an inspector, 'if the end result is still weak, however much improvement there has been, how does that help the child?'

A primary school that demonstrates progress, for example between Key Stage I and Key Stage II, can achieve a 'good' and sometimes even an 'outstanding' Ofsted report – even if the result is below average. It is the same for secondary schools. Two years ago , for example, a mere 10% of pupils at the City of Leeds School passed five GCSEs. Yet its Ofsted report stated, 'This is an improving school offering a good quality education in a caring environment. The teaching is good and the leadership very good; it gives value for money.' That is no doubt a great consolation to the 90% of pupils who failed. Or Montgomery, Canterbury where, 'Pupils,' the inspectors reported complacently, 'are are increasingly achieving their potential. The leadership is strong and most of the teaching at least satisfactory.' Here only 7% passed five GCSEs. Ofsted criticises teachers for having low expectations when it is equally at fault. Only three of the 10 least

successful school in England were judged to be 'failing to give their pupils an acceptable standard of education.'⁴²

This emphasis on progress has serious implications. A good report means the school will not get inspected so frequently. It misleads parents. It misleads the public. It allows the Government to claim credit at the expense of pupils. 'What about the children in that so called 'improving' school?' demanded the inspector, 'We forget that this is their only chance of an education!'

Disadvantaged children are also not helped by another piece of government fudge – the deprivation factor. A school can get below average in its SATS results but still be classified as satisfactory because of its intake. Schools with ethnic minorities, for example, parents without college education, children with SEN and even too many boys, contribute to the deprivation factor. This is nothing more than an excuse for failure. It lets the school and the government off the hook. Quite how it helps pupils is less clear. A 'deprivation factor' is not going to get a young man a job, buy him a house or take him away on holiday.

The Government sets the rules. Ofsted has to make sure children are 'independent learners' in charge of their own education. Or as one boy said in exasperation, 'Why do teachers keep asking me what I want to learn? How am I supposed to know?' Lessons must be pupil rather than teacher led. They are not in favour of children sitting in rows listening. This is deemed too 'passive'. Lessons must be exciting.

⁴² *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 January 2008.

Inspectors must check that each child enjoys individual learning. An inspector and a number of teachers described this as 'a great sacred cow.' They could not see how a teacher could possibly 'manage a class of 30 on individual learning plans.' Inspectors also have to check if a child enjoys 'ownership' of its work. Work, for example, should not be corrected in red ink by the teacher. This, like many educational initiatives, misses the point. One inspector put down the low standard of writing, even in good schools, to the low standard of marking. She was shocked to discover that a child's work is marked often only one in three times for accuracy as it is 'too discouraging'. Even then children are not asked to write out corrections. When the inspector complained to the Lead Inspector he replied, 'I don't have a problem with that.'

Instead of concentrating on the basics, Ofsted inspectors check compliance with the latest government initiative. The flavour this year is healthy eating and community cohesion. Every school I visited had these two topics prominently displayed on their notice board. Nothing is left to chance where a government initiative is concerned. Schools 'causing concern' even have the contents of their notice board prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills.⁴³ Only in Communist China, shortly after the Cultural Revolution, did I see a similar display of state control.

Government initiatives are a distraction from what an Ofsted inspector should be doing. One said, 'I spend more time looking in children's' lunch boxes than testing their literacy.'

As for community cohesion, the government considers this such a priority that the inspector had to go on a special training course, costing £58 and lasting an afternoon. It is obviously not

⁴³ Letter to *The Times*, 12 May 2008.

an easy matter as the guidance notes on the Ofsted website make clear.⁴⁴ Ofsted inspectors must ensure a school, 'has developed an understanding of its own community in a local and national context, including an awareness of each of the three strands of faith, ethnicity and culture, and the socio-economic dimension.' Each school has to demonstrate it 'has planned and taken an appropriate set of actions, based upon its analysis of its context, to promote community cohesion within the school and beyond the school community'.

Why, we might ask, is a body guilty of such gobbledegook in charge of our children's education? The Ofsted inspector admitted she found herself thinking, 'Beyond the school community to where? Nationally? Internationally? Well and what about the moon?'

Educational fashions and government initiatives are at best distractions from what the child should be doing. Someone, said one inspector, needs to make a child sit down, work hard and learn to concentrate. Schools need to ensure their pupils can read, write, add up, speak intelligibly and behave properly. And inspectors should be checking that they do so.

The act of studying at an early age provides invaluable lessons for later life. The men I interviewed in their twenties and thirties had never experienced the repetition and effort needed for school work. This meant they had never learnt self-discipline or how to concentrate. It had wasted their teenage years. It also makes it almost impossible for them to get on now. For they do not know how to turn a burst of enthusiasm into the day to day

⁴⁴ Ofsted, *Inspecting maintained schools' duty to promote community cohesions – guidance for inspectors*, February 2009.

effort required for success. They have been crippled as surely as if someone had hacked off a limb. The inner-city science teacher said of the weeping boy in his class who is now a thief. 'He has been failed and we will continue to fail him. He is a statistic and he will be a statistic for the rest of his life.'

Where does that leave teenage boys? Humiliated, lacking self confidence and pessimistic about their future. One 15 year old from Liverpool described his fears, 'It's scary having a bad education. I am scared when I am older and get a job there will be, like, all these numbers and all these words I won't be able to understand.' He at least still thinks he can get a job.

'It doesn't take a lot to set me off'

The failure of primaries schools to teach and Ofsted to check comes home to roost in secondary school. By 14, most of the teenage boys I interviewed had been excluded, were playing truant or, when they did show up, could barely be controlled. As a number of boys themselves pointed out, 'If you don't catch them the last two years of primary school and the first year of secondary school, they are gone.' Between eight and eleven, 'They are still young enough to get a grip on.'

Illiteracy is a powerful factor in bad behaviour and truancy. A researcher at the US Department of Justice concluded that reading failure at school, 'meets all the requirements for bringing about and maintaining the frustration level that frequently leads to delinquency.' This 'sustained frustration' causes 'aggressive anti-social behaviour.'⁴⁵ Or as one 15 year old said, 'I feel bad. I don't feel

⁴⁵ M S Brunner, *Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential*, Halcyon House, 1993.

good in myself. I got no pride in myself. I am angry over every single little thing. It doesn't take a lot to set me off.'

The result is a discipline crisis in our schools. 12 to 14 is the age when boys often start to behave badly. In 2006 boys between that age made up 54% of all expulsions and eight out of ten exclusions at secondary school. As a result they make up the vast majority of youngsters in Pupil Referral Units for banned children.

This is not surprising given the high levels of poor literacy among that age group. 63% of 14 year old white working class boys have a reading ability of half their age. Over half, 54% of 14 year old black Caribbean boys have a reading age of seven. These are devastating figures. Teenage boys of 13 and 14 have a pressing need to excel in front of their peers. The humiliation caused by poor literacy cannot be over estimated. One Probation Officer recalled the advice he received when joining the service, 'Above everything else, never put them in a situation that reminds them of school.' A Captain in the Cadets pointed out that many boys with no other way to prove themselves turn to bad behaviour 'as a medal of honour. The more trouble they cause, the more status they get within their group.'

Crusher, a former armed robber from Brixton, explained why he had begun 'to kick off'. At 14 ashamed of his reading, 'you rather say nothing in class because you might be wrong. When you realize you can get away with it, you start some trouble. You don't have the ability to engage so you might as well distract the class. Then you find someone like yourself and you distract it together.'

Gary, a muscled 17 year old with a thatch of blond hair from the north east explained he became the class clown because 'I want to be the one who stands out. My mates that played around they got all the attention from the adults.'

Steve, a bright but illiterate 15 year old from Liverpool recalled being abandoned at the back of the class, 'to do my own thing.' He went on, 'If you get left behind the teachers don't really care so you start misbehaving to get attention.' He was eventually thrown out of four schools.

Resentful and humiliated boys turn schools into violent places Last year class room disruption hit record levels with schools sending home 2,200 children every day. In 2007 head teachers handed out a record 434,280 expulsions and suspensions. Almost half of the pupils were barred for violent, threatening or aggressive behaviour directed at teachers or other pupils.⁴⁶

The behaviour of Antonia's son deteriorated at secondary school. Unable to read, she recalled. 'He did not want his friends to think he was stupid. He got frustrated. He was throwing chairs around and was a danger to others.' The school threatened to kick him out. 'It was a nightmare. Once he tried to run away. He was sobbing and sobbing. I had to chase him up the road. I thought it was something I had done.'

Crusher recalled his rage and frustration over his lack of literacy, 'Your anger builds up. People are sayin all these nasty things about you. Then you start getting into fights. Then you end up with the headmaster. How can you explain at 14 all what's in your head? It's mad.'

Youngsters import into class the ills that blight their lives – drugs, gangs and abusive parents. It leads to behaviour which ranges from anti-social to violent. In this situation schools, far more than for the middle class child, must offer a refuge and a

⁴⁶ *The Daily Mail*, 26 June 2008.

contrast. They must give boys with what they need to thrive. According to the Headmaster of Harrow 'boys respond best to clear rules, clear deadlines and punishments.' Unlike girls, they like hierarchies, drill and competition.

An Ofsted report agreed. When it examined what helped boys achieve in secondary school, it found that, 'a clearly defined disciplinary framework is especially marked for boys... backed up by effective pastoral systems and learning support.'⁴⁷ Another Ofsted report on inner-city schools, noted that imposing traditional discipline boosts results and behaviour among pupils from deprived backgrounds. This also found that only 17% of inner-city schools are outstanding. Some 43% are 'no better than satisfactory' including 9% which are 'inadequate' or failing.⁴⁸ So why is Ofsted powerless to give boys what they know they need? Once more ideology takes precedence. The attributes picked out by Ofsted as benefiting disadvantaged boys – structure, discipline, formal assemblies, smart uniforms and a strong pastoral system – are anathema to many of our educationalists.

Teenage boys can be baffling and infuriating in the classroom. They crack disgusting jokes. They try and make their friends laugh. They need frequent breaks to let off steam. The mother of a boy in private school recalled him coming home beaming after his first week. 'I love this school, mums,' he said. They had four breaks throughout the day. Even so sometimes his English teacher made them stop work, go outside and run around hard for five minutes. The mother of a boy in a state school had a very different experience. She worried her son was always getting

⁴⁷ Ofsted, *Managing challenging behaviour*, 2005.

⁴⁸ *The Daily Mail*, 23 February 2009.

told off at school. 'But I know he's not naughty. He's just being a boy. He's loud and boisterous but loud doesn't always equal bad.' She complained his teachers wanted him to be quiet, to sit, 'and concentrate for long periods of time without any exercise. I think teachers want boys to be like girls and it's turning my son off school'.⁴⁹

In the class room, boys enjoy competition and work best in competing teams. Instead they find themselves put into small groups, expected to direct their own studies – a turn off for them but at which girls excel. Then boys feel more comfortable in an hierarchy. But first the teacher has to establish that they are at the top of the hierarchy. This may mean being nasty to start off with. Many female teachers do not understand this. They are unwilling to be strict and when challenged by the boys, react by sending them elsewhere to be punished instead of exerting authority themselves.

This is disastrous for boys from disadvantaged backgrounds. Educationalists argue that schools cannot compensate for the failings of society. This is exactly what schools should be doing. School is the one place where we have access to these boys and can make a difference. It is our one chance to make up for their home lives and transform their future.

The headmaster of a school serving a deprived ward on Teesside explained of his pupils, 'A lot of them don't have parents who can be the adults; they're just older versions of them, going around in circles. There might be no one to give the advice and set the boundaries, about homework, bedtime, fast food or anything. We

⁴⁹ Sarah Ebner blog, Times online, 10 March 2009.

just have to be in there. The students need to know that you about them.⁵⁰

Another head pointed out that parents from poor backgrounds expect their children to behave and learn in school – even if they cannot discipline their children themselves. He went on, ‘So you end up applying standards the parents recognise but can’t attain outside.’ By being consistent, ‘You gain an enormous amount of respect from the parents,’ even though, ‘Those are the very things that do not exist on the estate – although they would like them to.’

Discipline in school matters more for disadvantaged boys than their middle class counterparts. It can even make up for the effects of poverty. An experiment using marmoset monkeys shows that poverty can damage the brain by stunting the growth of neurons.⁵¹ Instead of creating new cells and connections, the brain diverts energy towards survival. Interestingly it was not poverty itself that damaged children – but the disorder and instability associated with disadvantage. The routine of a good school allows a child to relax and form those all important connections.

Far from offering order and stability, almost half of inner-city schools are a free for all. No one suffers more in these schools than teenage boys themselves.

Three 13 year olds, Cecil, Nathan and David, two black and one mixed race, described what it was like to attend two ‘satisfactory’ inner-city schools. They were on edge most of the time. ‘At school we are afraid,’ they said. Teachers offered neither protection nor concern. The majority were women, a quarter ‘quite young and

⁵⁰ D Mongon and C Chapman, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ J Margo and M Dixon, *op. cit.*

scared of us.' One teacher had been beaten up and another stalked by pupils. When bigger boys arrived at school with knives, 'They don't search them.' When boys fought, 'The teachers just wait and watch. They don't intervene because they don't really care about us.'

Even the male teachers offered little safety. Nathan and Cecil recalled an older boy walking into their class and punching another in the face. 'There was blood everywhere.' The male teacher got three of the bigger boys to pull him off. He himself was reluctant to touch the bully in case of disciplinary action. But in the state school system, it is alright to use 13 year olds instead.

Neither school offered sport or after school clubs. In their absence, the bigger boys arranged fights between rival schools and gangs. These were regular events. In Cecil and Nathan's school, the fights took place on Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays. In David's school they kicked off most Friday lunch times. The bigger boys blocked off the end of the road so no one could escape. The cousins and older brothers of the Asian kids sat outside in cars waiting. Once, said David, the police had opened the boot of one of their cars and found it full of weapons. Cecil said, 'The teachers can definitely see the Asians are racists but they don't care.'

The boys were upset and angry that the teachers only called the police the day after the fight. 'The teachers are scared even to call the police,' said David with contempt. Cecil was adamant, 'The police should be there every day. That's their job.'

Boys from rival gangs broke into Cecil and Nathan's school regularly. They climbed over from the next door community centre then wandered through the school picking random fights. The school was so big and with so many students that,

'the teachers never notice,' said Cecil indignantly. Nathan pointed out their school employed only one security guard. 'Well there was two,' he amended, 'but the other got scared and left.'

The boys were afraid in school and going to and from home. 'We are in the middle of it,' they said. David had asked his father to pick him up 'but he works,' he added regretfully. None of the boys had ever seen a teacher at the school gates. Nathan said, 'They all got cars. They drive off to their nice homes.' Cecil nodded, 'They are not out there trying to get home like us.' It seemed superfluous to ask if they actually learnt anything. As another 13 year old at school in Kilburn explained, 'At school there are too many of us in the class and too much noise. The teacher can't control us.'

Parents were shocked at the lack of discipline. 'Schools,' said one black father, 'do not have a discipline policy. They just call the police.' Ray Lewis, founder of the Eastside Young Leaders Academy, said, 'We are in danger of sending out the wrong signals to our boys that grown ups can't deal with bad behaviour. Are we really admitting that we have no other strategy, that we can't think of anything else but to call out the police to discipline our children?'

The lack of discipline permeates every aspect of school life. In one school in the North East, I was surprised to discover the lunch break lasted only half an hour. Why not a longer one, I asked, to include extra activities like sports, art and drama clubs as in an independent school? The master looked at me as if I had come from another planet. 'How would we control them?' he asked.

Unfortunately many educators view discipline with the same distaste as synthetic phonics. It belongs to the dark age. When one black, inner-city teacher sent a boy to the deputy head for swearing, she was reprimanded. 'He did not swear at you,' said the

deputy, 'he swore in front of you and so clearly does not deserve a one-day suspension.' When she recounted this story to a friend, he burst out laughing. Where, he asked, had his 'lovely lefty girl' gone who used to read theory and talk about bringing down the system. The black teacher was outraged. 'You're telling me I am a Tory because I have standards,' she exclaimed. She went on, 'What you don't get is that you are the system now. You are the people I am fighting. You are the people who keep my kids poor.'⁵²

This attitude towards discipline is clear from teacher training itself. When the teaching union NASUWT researched the experiences of newly qualified teachers, many complained their training had not prepared them to deal with disruptive pupil behaviour. 60% were worried about behaviour and indiscipline even before they took up their first teaching post. Over half admitted to feeling unable to cope with bullying in the class room.

The attitude of Graham Holley, chief executive of the Training and Development Agency, is telling. In an interview he stated, 'It is quite possible to tolerate a level of disruption in a class and for there still to be learning taking place. Also just because pupils have stopped throwing things about, it doesn't mean they're now learning well.'⁵³ He went on, 'It is a very difficult challenge for a teacher to learn this. They will need continuing professional development.' No doubt. As a black maths teacher in Streatham said, 'Teacher training college is a waste of time. I learnt more in youth camp in the US.'

⁵² 'To miss with love', blog of a black inner-city school teacher.

⁵³ *The Independent*, 18 September 2008.

'I've had it with those little shits'

Teachers have few sanctions against bad behaviour. One teacher from an inner-city school explained he had two options. He can hold a boy back 15 minutes at morning break or half an hour over lunch time – 'and I have to give up my own break to watch him.' For something worse, he can give a detention to keep a boy after school for 45 minutes. The teacher must write an incident report and the school must inform the parents. By the time this has happened a week or ten days has passed. The punishment has lost its point. The boy only sits one detention – however many he may have collected in the meantime.

The teacher explained, 'It's got no value and it's not really a punishment.' The boy spends the detention with his friends, 'then is out on the street causing havoc and beating up boys from the neighbouring school.' One teenager from Newcastle said, 'I git detention at lunch break and have to write lines. It doesn't have a big impact. The next day I kick off and just do it all over again.'

As one teacher with a back ground in the cadets said 'Teachers are teaching in a world of no punishment. They have to rely on strength of character. If they have not got that, there's nothing to fall back on.'

Research from the US stresses the significance of teachers. It is more important, according to Professor Dylan William of the Institute of Education, than cutting class size or new technology.⁵⁴ He said, 'Children in the most effective classrooms will learn in six months what students in an average classroom learn in a year – and students in the least effective classrooms will take two years to learn,' – if they ever do. Ofsted agrees,

⁵⁴ *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 April 2009.

'The importance of learners experiencing consistently high quality teaching cannot be overemphasised'.⁵⁵ Unfortunately in almost half of inner-city schools, staff turn a blind eye to disciplinary offences, have a high teacher turn over and are more likely to tolerate incompetent teachers.

This has repercussions for the boy from a disadvantaged background. In a world with few adult role models, teachers take on an almost super-human importance. A teacher who has spent 20 years in a tough north London school said kids from bad backgrounds need one adult in the school, 'who you know has a real interest in you and is behind you' She said, 'It's jolly tough when you got to be *in loco parentis* as well as a teacher' But, 'children know exactly who really care for their progress and is on their side. You can't dissemble. When these kids take against a teacher, it's mayhem.' A black maths teacher from the other side of London said, 'They have to know where your heart is. Once they feel your heart that cuts down on a lot of discipline problems.'

A head master pointed out that schools need to create an atmosphere in which high expectations are seen as evidence of care and concern – not surveillance or constraint. The young men I interviewed, however violent or difficult, associated concern with discipline. One young criminal and crack addict said, 'You know when someone cares for you because they are on your case.' A 14 year old from Streatham described his school, 'It's alright, it's decent. The teachers are good, very strict.' Bigs recalled a woman teacher in Peckham so tough she still made him nod admiringly 15 years later. A group of black pupils in a comprehensive in the East End had nothing but contempt for all

⁵⁵ Ofsted, *Annual Report, 2007/08*,

their teachers except their maths teacher – another woman. ‘She’s alright,’ they kept reassuring me. Crusher, the former armed robber also remembered fondly his maths teacher, ‘She was the only person who had time for me. She cared for me. She reckoned she could see something in me – that I had the ability.’

Pete respected the PE teacher in his school in the Midlands. ‘Everyone did’. He was ‘hard line, old school. If he caught you smoking, he put you in detention.’ At break time, ‘he was out there in the playground talking to us – not sitting like the rest of them in the staff room. He should have been headmaster.’ Pete recalled, ‘He thought I was alright’ When the headmaster summoned Pete and his father to a meeting to discuss Pete’s behaviour, the PE teacher also attended, ‘He was the only one who spoke up for me. He said I was in the top 5% at school – even though I couldn’t read or write.’

Far from providing boys with what they need, too many schools compound the indifference and chaos of their home life. A captain in the Cadets pointed out teenage boys did better in small, disciplined units. Many state schools are just too big. Discipline is not consistent between one teacher and the next. There are only subject teachers and little or no pastoral care. ‘People are flying past each other with no contact or control. Kids are left to their own devices and get into trouble.’

One young man whose mother was forever changing her boy friend recalled school was not much different. ‘We had four headmasters in four years. One lasted six weeks. Basically our school was crap.’ Another recalled that in a school with 34 teachers, ‘Every year there was a new headmaster and ten new teachers. In Year 8 one teacher left at half term with a nervous break down. We would stand and watch the new headmaster for that year arrive with the new teachers. They were soft targets. We had no respect for them.’

Gary from Newcastle pointed out that about 70% of his teachers were female, 'They were that soft,' he said dismissively. Another admitted young female staff were considered, 'Fair game.' Certainly they did nothing to halt the mayhem coming off the streets and into their classrooms. One boy explained, 'There are a group of us lads involved with the same things, drugs, crime and football. We are known in school as bad lads and we didn't take a lot of crap from the teachers.' A black youth worker complained, 'Nothing happens to the boys. They think they are untouchable.'

Many explained they used school to deal in drugs and stolen goods. A thick set 16 year old from West Norwood said, 'School made me a lot of money. Anything I got my hands on, I sold in school, He started at ten with packets of crisps then moved on to, 'pedal bikes, blazers, anything.' One young man at a school in Streatham told me. 'If I say go away and leave me alone, the teacher leaves me alone sitting at the back of the class planning our next drug deal.' A white boy from a council estate in the Midlands agreed, 'We got away with making drug deals in class. They knew what we were doing but they did nothing.' They interpreted laxity as indifference. One said bitterly, 'Not one teacher cared about me.' Jake summed it up, 'They didn't have a lot of respect for us and we didn't respect them.'

Whether a boy has a good or bad teacher is arbitrary. Just like an NHS nurse, it is impossible to reward a good teacher or fire a poor one. The same teacher will fail to teach her boys to read, year after year, and nothing happens to her. One teacher recalled in his school not a single person passed GCSE English but the teacher was not sacked. The NUT, he explained, 'would create a stink.'

In this situation, whether a teacher is dedicated or not is entirely up to them. One explained, 'I stay until 6pm every evening,' but admitted he was in the minority. 'About half of us work really hard

to make a difference. The other half are putting in time until they retire.' A number of teenage boys complained their teachers were frequently absent. 'She either at a meeting or not at school,' said one of his science teacher, 'She puts no work out and lets you do what you like.' Others complained they spent too many lessons on the computer. They saw government plans to put IT at the heart of every subject as a cop-out. One said, 'The teacher knows we are playing computer games but she leaves us alone.'

One man, visiting disadvantaged schools to encourage university uptake, noticed a small minority of teachers, 'devote every hour, every weekend to trips and clubs.' But the vast majority, 'don't stay late or give up weekends.' A man who arranges outreach programmes for troubled children said most teachers flatly refused to come at weekends. A headmaster from a private school was visiting a state school. It was 4pm. 'I was amazed how quiet it was,' he said. Everyone had gone home. 'Our school place is vibrant with after school activities.'

Over and over again boys complained teachers put failing down to upbringing – never weak teaching. Pete said, 'Teachers at my school blamed the parents all the time. My teacher just did her job. She was four years from her pension – anything for a quiet life.' Many saw in this a conspiracy. 'Not giving us an education, that's their way of putting us back in chains, making us slaves again init?' said one young man from Streatham. Another summed up a general view. The jobs of Special Needs Teachers, social workers, YOT teams, prison wardens and the police depended on 'black boys failing. If we don't keep on failing, what would happen to all those high salaries?'

Black parents were especially bitter. One black social worker explained, 'These teachers stay in disadvantaged schools not out of dedication but because it's undemanding,' She went on, 'They

are getting good money, £34,000 to £40,000 a year, holidays and when they fail our children, it's "Well, everyone understands where they are from!" A black community leader said, 'If those damn teachers were in a better school, they would have to perform, wouldn't they? They would have demanding parents wanting to know "Why haven't you made my child a high flier?"'

The man trying to encourage disadvantaged boys to become undergraduates recalled a teacher storming into the staff room, exclaiming, 'I have had it with those little shits.' He was told not to bother with talk of university because, 'We got a bunch of underachievers here.' He felt that equally described the teachers who were, 'not marking work on time, losing course work and application forms, not writing references in time or knowing the right date for applications.'

A white teacher in an inner-city school pointed out, 'Your students can go on failing but as long as you can justify it, as long as you create a folder of evidence for your Career Professional Development, you move smoothly on to the next pay level.' He admitted, 'The subject knowledge of about half the teachers in my school is crap. Their literacy levels are crap. They are not dynamic and have no passion for anything. I would hate them teaching my children.' Why did they not move to an easier school? He shook his head. 'They wouldn't stand a chance. They would be intimidated by bright, educated children.'

When a good teacher makes such a difference, what is the role of Ofsted? One Ofsted inspector admitted they refused to comment on individual teachers – however bad. Ofsted does not want to be used to dismiss teachers. She explained, 'It's not easy to sack teachers and never has been. The children are the casualties. They do not get a second chance.'

'No one ever made me sit down and learn'

Schools are failing young men in another, less obvious way. Recent research from here and the US has produced compelling evidence linking certain attributes to success in later life.

In the US recent studies examined the academic performance of young people.⁵⁶ They discovered that self-discipline is more than twice as important as IQ for predicting final grades in high school. They defined a child's self-discipline by looking at school attendance, the hours spent doing homework, the hours spent watching television and the time of the day that students began their homework. Self-discipline also predicated which student would improve their test scores over the course of a school year. IQ, on the other hand, gave little indication.

In a UK study, researchers examined the importance of qualifications, compared to personal and social skills on earnings in later life. They looked at the British Cohort Study which tracks a group of children born in April, 1970 to discover what, in their thirties, had made the difference. Again the ability to apply yourself at the age of ten proved far the greatest indicator. Dedication and a capacity for concentration at ten have as big an impact on earnings by the age of 30 as mathematical ability, 8.9% higher earnings compared to 8.2%. Even more surprisingly, self-motivation had a bigger impact than even reading ability on future earnings.

These results are heartening. Application and self-discipline are not dictated by intelligence, class or privilege. They may be a lot easier to acquire if your parents have them. But they can be learnt anywhere and by anyone. They do not require new facilities. But they do need an education system convinced of their importance.

⁵⁶ J Margo and M Dixon, *op. cit.*

That is where too many of our state schools are falling down. They are failing to inculcate these all important qualities in boys. Self-discipline and application remain characteristic of the middle classes. Their monopoly of these attributes goes a long way to explain their monopoly of the best universities and jobs. Failure of schools to teach them is condemning teenage boys from poor backgrounds to a life time of wasted opportunities.

Many young men in their twenties and thirties were only too aware they had missed out. 'No one ever made me sit down and learn,' complained one young man, 'I never caught the habit.' More than one asked sadly, 'Why does no one tell you when you are fourteen that these things are so important?' A young man who after a few difficult years is now doing well in the cadets said, 'At times it seems harsh but it's for your own good.' Bigs, a former gang leader now aged 30 who spent seven years in prison from the age of 15, sighed, 'It's a discipline factor I needed in my life. Spur of the moment anger got me into trouble.'

Patrick Derham, Head Master of Rugby School, made clear the importance role of schools for these boys' life chances when he said, 'But a good education is not about money, it is about values; about fostering self-motivation, discipline and aspiration: qualities that can be found in any home and any school regardless of sector or class.' He went on to point out, 'If there is a division it is not between classes but between good schools and bad...The greatest schools enable pupils to be the best they can.'⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 3 November 2008.

5. FAILING THE BRIGHTEST

The inability of state schools to give boys what they need hits one group of boys particularly hard – bright, white working class and black Caribbean boys. It is a loss both to them and society.

A black maths teacher who has taught in some of south London's most troubled schools summed up the rewards of reaching this particular group of students. He was filling his car with petrol. Suddenly a former pupil called out to him. The difficult, argumentative boy the teacher recalled was now transformed. He was well dressed and driving 'a sparkling Mercedes'. His old teacher stared in admiration. He recalled, 'This guy just looked crisp.' Inspired by his teacher, the former pupil had gone into engineering and done well. The maths teacher explained, 'You have to motivate them. They have to see the importance of your subject.' He pointed out Asian and Chinese boys 'get it'. But black and white working class boys 'have got to get over a lot of things before you can get to most of them. But once they catch the vision, your job is done.'

A black social worker pointed out, 'They have to understand they can elevate themselves through education – that it has transforming powers.'

Despite spending billions of pounds on education over the last decade, social mobility has fallen since 1958. Poor children are less likely to escape their parent's social class now than in the 1950s according to a study by the London School of Economics commissioned by the Sutton Trust.⁵⁸ And as the Shadow Education Secretary Michael Gove has pointed out, out of 75,000 children eligible for free school meals, only 5,000 were entered for A levels. Of these, just 189 got three As. Of that 189, only 75 were boys. Yet in the same year Eton had 175 boys who got three As at A level. That is, one school has almost 2½ times as many boys getting three As as the entire population of our poorest boys.⁵⁹

Another study of thousands of children born in 2000 and 2001 found that those who scored highly in vocabulary tests at three still fell behind by seven if they came from poor homes. On the other hand middle class children with low scores at three over took the bright but poor children at seven. Primary schools had failed to make up for the advantaged conferred by a middle class parent. These are damning results. The mediocre are promoted at the expense of the talented. The gifted see their lives wasted. Apart from causing misery and frustration, it is also deeply divisive for society.

Once again, it is a lack of literacy that holds back even the brightest. In East London a mother approached her pastor at her wits end about her ten year old son. His school insisted he was making good progress but he could not read. Her pastor called a

⁵⁸ J Blanden et al, *Changes in Intergenerational Mobility in Britain*, LSE, 2002.

⁵⁹ M Gove MP, 'First Year Education Priorities for a New Government', Speech to the Centre for Policy Studies, 5 November 2009.

meeting with the teacher. The teacher pointed to the reports, 'He's doing very well,' she said. The pastor repeated that the boy could not read. 'Well, he always appear to be on the ball,' said the teacher. The pastor insisted the boy sit a test. The teacher was astonished to discover that one of her brightest pupils could not read. 'Well there's 30 in the class. How can I keep up with every one of them?' she said. The pastor pointed out she had a classroom assistant. That made it a ratio of 15 to one – about the same as at a private school. 'No one told me,' said the teacher. 'How I am supposed to find it out?' The pastor was disgusted, 'If you have to ask yourself that question, you should ask yourself why are you here.'

The lack of literacy is part of a wider failing. A recent report from Ofsted on inner-city schools admitted thousands of bright children are being let down by schools with limited ambitions.⁶⁰ They fail to create an orderly environment for learning. They focus less on academic ability because they believe poverty is an excuse for under-achievement. They are also more likely to tolerate incompetent teachers and 'ghost children' – those who go through their entire school careers with little or no attention.

One Ofsted inspector who also tutors state school children admitted, 'When I look at the kids I deal with what alarms me is the lack of ambition.' He has a number who should easily achieve five good GCSEs, 'but schools push them onto Mickey Mouse courses.'

The Ofsted report highlights 12 schools for 'defying the association of disadvantage with low standards,' and scoring 'outstanding' grades for their deprived intakes. Unfortunately in most disadvantaged areas, schools like these are the exception

⁶⁰ Ofsted, *Twelve outstanding secondary schools: excelling against the odds*, 2009.

rather than the rule. What is preventing this from happening in every school with an intake of poor children?

The task is certainly hard. Schools have to overcome difficult back grounds and low aspirations. One mixed race young man of 22 who got good A levels in prison recalled a defining moment at secondary school. He entered the class room. The teacher, 'an Asian talking in a Rastafarian accent said, "if you want to learn come to the front. If not go to the back".' He looked at the back and saw a pregnant girl puffing on a cigarette and a boy hanging out of the window smoking a spiff. He recalled, 'That was the cross roads for me. Sit in the front and learn or sit at the back and be normal.' He chose to be 'normal'.

Bright boys need an incentive to work at school. As a teacher in a school in the North East remarked, 'That incentive is not there,' if they do not see work or a career at the end of it. In Brixton one 16 year old dismissed with contempt the courses Connexions were continually pushing him into. 'If just one led to a job then I would do it,' he said.

The Head master of the Edward Sheerien Secondary School in South Yorkshire blamed the benefit culture. 'It's not always the case that people can't get jobs. The benefit culture is embedded in some families. The more we look at it, the more it is an issue.' Inarticulate and socially inept white working class boys, however bright, presented the school with its greatest challenge. He went on, 'There is a general lack of ambition and a lack of aspirations.'

He had tried to overcome these with the National Education of Boys Breakthrough Programme. The boys had responded enthusiastically. As the deputy head said, 'It worked well because those boys also felt very special.' Despite its success, it was dropped. The school could not afford, 'to keep putting the intensity

of resources and time into one area when there are so many other groups in need of support.’ Over the last three years the percentage of ethnic minority pupils has risen sharply. White working class boys were now in direct competition for funds with ‘the range of language support needed for pupils.’⁶¹

Too many teachers fail to inspire their children with an alternative vision for the future. A teacher at Cardinal Hume Voluntary Aided Roman Catholic School, one of the 12 picked out by Ofsted as outstanding, remarked, ‘I am shocked when I hear teachers at other schools bemoaning how difficult their intake is... We don’t do that here. If you say something like that it will eventually permeate into what you do, affect your tactics, become an excuse.’

A civil war refugee from Somalia discovered when she joined an inner-city comprehensive that it was not background or personal circumstances that held back the young people. It was lack of discipline and low expectations. ‘There is no focus on education,’ she complained. Instead there was a class of more than 20 students, ‘trying to annoy the teacher.’ At the same time the teacher was saying to the pupils, ‘Don’t try and do that it might be too hard. Don’t worry you can get a C grade without that.’

When a bright pupil capable of getting to university described his future job – stacking shelves in the local supermarket – the teacher did not urge an alternative career. Instead, ‘I pointed out the many positive aspects of the job – meeting people and so forth.’ He admitted the school, unlike one in the private sector in which he had worked, made little attempt to raise pupils’ expectations. Another teacher said firmly it was not, ‘his place’ to encourage a bright pupil to move from his area or live in anything

⁶¹ D Mongon and C Chapman, op. cit.

but a council house. 'I had no plans. I was given no aspirations,' said a young man from north Kensington. The teachers did not see the link between this and pupil apathy.

'These teachers are not going to the funerals'

Far from encouraging their students, too many teachers are suspicious of success. They equate talent with elitism and put their ideology over freedom of opportunity for their students. This is clear from the reaction of a number of schools to a government scheme to nurture ability in the most able children – defined as the top 10% of the school population in education, sport or art. Some schools refused to provide details of these pupils, discovered research commissioned by the government, for 'fear of being branded élitist'. The attitude of teachers is best summed up their nickname for the young people on the scheme – 'GITS'.⁶²

One man described the effect this had on the pupils in the comprehensive school near Oxford where he taught. 'Any attempt to encourage gifted pupils to look at Oxbridge was met with scorn by a management team which seemed to be far more interested in class war than academic attainment.' It all made for, 'a singularly depressing experience'.⁶³

The result of this attitude shows in the figures. In 2007, 11,628 – or 14.3% – of gifted pupils failed to get five good GCSEs including English and Maths. What does it say about the state of our education system when one in seven of the top 10% of our brightest state students are leaving school at 16 without even this basic qualification? This is a waste of talent on a massive scale.

⁶² *The Daily Mail*, 30 January 2009.

⁶³ Letter to *The Times*, 4 October 2007.

And it is unnecessary. Ray Lewis, founder of the Young Leaders Academy, has got three of his boys on scholarships to Rugby and Eton. He says, 'These are all bright boys from poor backgrounds. Their schools had given up on them. Now they are doing really well. Why do they have to go to a private school to succeed?'

A teacher recalled at teaching training college, 'we were quite literally instructed to leave the smarter children to themselves and concentrate on the main group. We were told they would find their own ways.' He himself had been considered a high achiever. 'I was indeed left to my own devices. The problem with this turned out to be that I totally lost interest in the boring stuff they were doing... I didn't even have to think to turn in the stuff I was required to do to get top grades.' Far from finding his way, 'I fell behind in maths particularly and became disengaged from school.'

Official figures obtained by Tory schools spokesman, Nick Gibb reveal that once more the first few years of secondary school are the problem. In half of comprehensives, one in five pupils are failing to make progress in science between 11 and 14. 4,400 very bright children who scored above average 'level fives' in their science tests at 11 had actually dropped down a grade.⁶⁴

This was certainly the experience of a group of angry black 14 and 15 year olds at a East London comprehensive. The year before they had all been in the top sets for maths and science. Now they found themselves in mixed ability classes and, they complained, 'bored out of our brains.' Stinger, a young black man from Kilburn had the same problem. At primary school, 'like I was really interested in science. I wanted to learn. I was at the front of the class listening. I did my homework.' Then he moved up to secondary school where,

⁶⁴ Hansard, 28 March 2007.

'not everyone was the same level. It got so boring. We were not stimulated. I wanted to do all those experiments. But they just talk to you about health and safety. They treat you like a child.' The boys longer took pride in their favourite subject. It had a disastrous affect on their behaviour. They had all been suspended. Some were getting into trouble with the police.

Faced with a similar situation, middle class parents have options. They can hire a tutor, complain to the head, change schools or even send their child to private school. Black parents, as many pointed out to me, have no such alternative. When school fails their son, it is much more serious. The boy is out on the street and into gangs. As one mother said, 'I don't know when a policeman is going to knock on the door and say my 14 year old is dead or has murdered another child,' she went on. 'These teachers are not going to the funerals. They are not doing the grieving.'

'We can't take them at 18 if they've not been educated.'

The Government refuses to confront reality. Instead of tackling bad schools, it is gaming the exam system. The inflated results make schools – and the Government – look good. But it comes at the expense of the bright student from a disadvantaged background.

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders is clear. League tables have created perverse incentives. Schools are forced to skew the curriculum for 14 and 15 year olds towards subjects 'in which it is easier to reach Grade C.' A levels have similar perversions.

In order to be sure of meeting targets, schools are deliberately pushing able pupils away from studying difficult subjects like science and languages. But it is these traditional subjects that top universities want. Soft subjects, 'anything with a studies' in it, as one head master remarked, do not win places at a good university.

Geoff Parks, director of admissions at Cambridge University, said, 'We know the school's bright students are on track to get As, but in subject combinations that essentially rule them out.'

This has devastating consequences for disadvantaged teenagers. They must trust that their schools have their best interests at heart. Too often this is not the case, as the Sutton Trust discovered. An online questionnaire of 3,000 students revealed that half believed that there was no difference in earnings between graduates of different universities. They had no idea it would dictate not only which university would take them but also their future salary. According to the London Institute of Education, a decade after leaving university, a fifth of graduates from leading universities, earn over £90,000 a year compared to just 5% of those from the new universities.

The state school student who manages to get to university faces yet another piece of government hocus-pocus. More than one in five of the 230,000 full time students entering university, drop out. These are mainly working class students. The Government has given universities almost £1 billion to support these students. But this is where illusion crashes into reality. A flaw in the system means universities are not penalised for recruiting students who do not graduate – providing they recruit even more to replace them and so fulfil the government target of getting 50% of youngsters into college. MPs on the Public Accounts Committee last year discovered that maths students, for example, claim they are being forced to quit because they lack basic numeracy skills and so do not understand assignments and lectures.

Sir Richard Sykes, then rector of Imperial College, London put it bluntly, 'The belief that there are thousands of kids out there who come from poorer backgrounds that are geniuses – there may be, but we can't take them at 18 if they've not been educated.'

6. CHARTER SCHOOLS

'A Journey to One of the Best Lives out there'

Our schools do not have to be like this. There are other models which have excellent results with children from difficult backgrounds without spending any more money.

In December 1998 the New York State Charter Schools Act allowed the creation of independent state schools based on a five year performance contract or 'charter'. A Charter's renewal depends on students reaching certain academic standards or the school is closed. How the schools reach those standards is up to them. They have the freedom to decide their curriculum, staffing and how to spend their budgets.

At a stroke the Charter Schools Act set schools free of political interference and educational dogma. Charter Schools vary enormously as do state charter laws. Some charters are started by teachers who want total freedom to pursue a progressive agenda. Not surprisingly these cater mostly to well-to-do-parents. Most importantly parents have choice. Teachers can experiment with different and innovate teaching methods. Schools are judged not on the content of their students' lunch boxes but on one criteria only – student achievement.

In New York, Charter Schools students are from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. 87% of public Charter School enrolment is African-American and Latino. 76% are eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch program. Charter Schools must attract the city's most disadvantaged parents because funding follows the child – \$12,432 per child in 2008. They have proved immensely popular and are over-subscribed. There are three children for every place and children are enrolled through lottery not selection.

Many teachers in English state schools blame pupil failure on their children's background. But what happens when you give the poorest parents from the inner cities choice? What kind of school do they want and is it any different from what, too often they get? I saw for myself when I took a lift in a New York school building. The lower floors were occupied by a typical public school (in America state schools are known confusingly for us as public schools). Squeezed onto the top floor is a successful Charter School – the Kipp Academy.

The contrast could not have been more startling. First the lift doors opened onto a floor occupied by the public school. Like many of its equivalents in the UK, the pupils appeared out of control. Three boys were fighting. Two girls were sitting on the ground listening to music and comparing nail polish. Other children wondered aimlessly about. The noise was deafening. We saw no adults, books or signs of work. The lift doors closed. We rose to the top floor but now the doors opened onto a completely different scene. Teenagers from the same catchment area were dressed in uniform and standing in line in front of an old table piled high with books. 'Is there a Book in your Back Pack?' demanded a notice. From the open doors of class rooms, we could hear lessons in progress. In

the distance an orchestra was practising. Pinned up on the notice board was not the latest government initiative but samples of student work with enthusiastic comments by teachers in red ink, 'Fantastic!' 'Amazing!' 'AWESOME!!' In the middle of the board in outsized letters, a sign proclaimed, 'It's easier to build strong children than repair broken men'.

How have Charter Schools tackled the same problems that beset boys in the UK state school system – discipline, motivation poor teaching and lack of academic qualifications? The answer is that Charter Schools have the freedom to make decisions that best meet the needs of their students rather than the latest government initiative. This is a crucial difference.

The Charter School is focused on closing not simply narrowing the achievement gap. A comparison of students at Charter Schools with those who had failed to get a place and were now in traditional public schools found Charter School students 'scored substantially higher on state reading and maths tests' than their public school counterparts.⁶⁵ For every year in a Charter School, pupils make up 12% of the distance from failing to proficient in math and 3.5% of the distance from failing to proficient in reading.

This academic achievement transforms lives. I asked one group of students before morning assembly at a Charter School in Harlem, where they saw themselves in ten years time. These mainly Black and Puerto Rican children of single mothers all had plans to become engineers, lawyers and accountants. What about their friends at the public school down the road? Where would they be? 'Selling drugs, in prison or dead,' they replied promptly.

⁶⁵ C M Hoxby and S Murarka, 'Who attends them and how well are they teaching their students?' *Education Next* Summer 2008.

Why are Charter Schools so successful? The Charter Schools I visited, however different from one another, are united in the belief that inner-city schools simply do not expect enough. Society has changed. It is no longer an option for a third to half of youngsters to get secure, blue collar, factory jobs. Those jobs are now in Guatemala, India or Bangladesh. Achievement First schools, for example, expect to have 90% of all its students who have been at the school for five years or more, to be at or above the proficiency level in all tested subjects.

In order to succeed, children from deprived backgrounds have to put in the hours. Before enrolling, children and parents agree they will be in school until 5pm or 6pm most days, on certain Saturdays and during part of the holidays. A Charter School year is up to 12 days longer than the public school year. About 55% of students attend a Charter School with a day that lasts eight hours or longer.

The longer day is used to ensure that students, unlike so many of the boys I interviewed in the UK, do not fall through the cracks. There is no sitting at the back of the class and getting left behind. 95% of students attend schools that administer standardised exams on a regular basis for diagnostic purposes. Nearly all New York Charter Schools assign a teacher or a pair of teachers to a group of students for the entire school year. These teachers are responsible for tracking their progress and meet their students almost daily. Students explained if they had found a lesson difficult they went over it again with their assigned teacher after 3pm that day. There was no question of spending years in a state of ignorance and anger.

The most important ingredients to a good Charter School is a good head with the power to run his school and excellent teachers. The schools I visited were in shabby buildings and lacked up to date IT equipment. The heads had made the

choice to spend their money where it mattered – on their teachers. About 49% of students attend a Charter School that has a system of bonuses for successful teachers. On the other hand only 17% of students are at a school whose teachers are unionised – and those are all at former public schools that converted to Charter status. Achievement First, for example, has its teachers on a one year contract combined with incentive pay. Weak teachers are let go and good teachers rewarded.

Charter Schools are keen on teacher training. Lessons are constantly scrutinised to ensure students are meeting those all important standards. Class room doors stay open. Chairs are set out for visitors, parents or other teachers to drop into a lesson at any time. This was in marked contrast to the schools I visited in the UK. Here classroom doors remained firmly closed. ‘No one goes into a lesson!’ exclaimed one head master. It is even regulated. Under rules introduced in 2007, observations of teachers by head masters are limited to three hours a year. (This is not meant to include casual observation.)⁶⁶

Charter Schools had a similar attitude to discipline. Teachers are there to teach and not waste valuable instruction time on crowd control. Unlike the state schools I visited in the UK, discipline was consistent throughout the school. The same bad behaviour received the same reaction from every member of staff. As the head at the Achievement First Charter School said ‘We sweat the small stuff’ (uniforms, walking in lines, eye contact) so that we don’t deal with the big stuff.’ About 21% of students attend a Charter School that encourages small courtesies and punishes small infractions in the classroom.

⁶⁶ TES, 15 May 2009.

Charter Schools also made discipline easier because punishment goes hand in hand with rewards. In Achievement First, every child carried a cheque book. At any time a teacher could award points or deduct them. Points entitled the child to school outings or to goods in the school shop. In Kipp it was even more basic. Children started the day on the floor of their classroom. They had to earn the right to sit on a chair and again to use their desk. Exceptional behaviour won them a T shirt – which they showed off with pride. Bad behaviour saw them back on the floor again.

Cristo Rey is not a Charter School but a Catholic, co-ed, New York High School in Harlem with an unusual solution to raising funds and engaging its students – particularly the boys. At 14, instead of playing truant or joining gangs, these teenage boys were enthusiastically taking part in Cristo Rey's Corporate Work Study program. Each young person works five full days a month, in job sharing teams of four, for a corporation. Joseph P Parkes, the Principal, explained the effect this had on his students. 'It's not easy for a lot of our kids. They have single mothers. Their fathers are often in jail. They have the idea they don't have to go to school – especially the boys.' But on the scheme, 'Every Tuesday say, a student gets to put on his ID card, travel down to Wall Street, as distant as the moon for some of these kids, where he is treated like an adult and sees another world. It encourages them to work at school. They see their boss has a corner office. They think one day they too can have such an office.'

In many state schools in the UK discipline is made almost impossible. Rewards do not exist and punishments mean nothing. You cannot threaten to take away a place on the football team or in the school play if there are no football teams or school plays. As the New York schools I visited demonstrate, discipline does not require funds. It does require a strong culture, imagination and constant effort.

At a heavily attended parents' meeting in Harlem, one mother said, 'I am very happy with this school. It's a fight to get children in but it's safe and disciplined.' The black Caribbean and white working class parents I interviewed in this country wanted something similar for their children. Like Charter Schools, they equate discipline, structure and hard work with success. They were bitter they had no influence over what happened in their child's school. They had no say in what kind of education they got. A number had heard of Charter Schools. One said, 'I could find you ten people to start such a school tomorrow if the government would let us.'

The majority of Charter Schools in New York see education as of fundamental importance and a civil rights issue. Bob Moses, a central figure in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, pointed out if a child cannot read by 7 'we know with frustrating accuracy' what will happen to him by 14 and by 21. He declared, 'The absence of math and literacy in urban and rural communities throughout this country is an issue as urgent as the lack of registered Black voters in Mississippi was in 1961.' We have exactly the same issues in our inner cities. The only difference is UK educators lack any sense of urgency. They do not even recognise there is a problem.

In a corridor of the Kipp Academy, children had stuck up what the school meant to them. One boy had written 'Kipp means my life, hard work, happiness and my actual future.' Another had said, 'It protects you from the rough world but prepares you for the real world.' A third commented simply, 'It is a journey to one of the best lives out there.'

7. SPORT AND YOUTH SERVICES

‘There is not much else to do apart from fight’

Films glamorise street life. But boredom, testosterone and frustration proved the overwhelming emotion of the teenage boys I interviewed. For anyone who has hung around on a street corner with a group of youths, the reality is very different.

Crime is a welcome alternative to the monotony. Bigs, a former gang leader described his youth, ‘standing up by the fence, drug dealing. You don’t want to be doing that all day. It’s so boring.’ A teenager in the North East summed up the attitude of many, ‘Yeah we do a lot of fighting at school. Every little thing just sets us off. There is not much to do apart from fight.’

Once more a combination of ideology and political gain has deprived many young men of what they need – activity. The government spends £3.4 billion a year dealing with anti-social behaviour but less than half of that, £1.6 billion, on youth service programmes.⁶⁷ Over and over again young men complained

⁶⁷ Audit Commission, *Tired of hanging around – Using sport and leisure activities to prevent anti-social behaviour by young people*, 2009.

there was nothing for them to do. Schools did not give them what they wanted and youth clubs were too often not accessible, reliable or relevant.

Competitive sports provides many teenage boys with what they crave – an outlet for their energy and aggression, a group with which to identify and a chance to prove themselves in front of their peers and to win the approbation of older males. Boys are motivated by competition even if they lose. They do not mind competing with their friends and, in fact competition, such as on the sports field, creates friendships. Private schools understand this and provide at least an hour of sport a day as well as after school clubs and weekend matches.

State schools, by contrast offer only one hour of sport a week. This is meant to increase to two hours by 2010. A recent survey of 4 million young people by the DCFS showed that 72% of them are failing to play regularly in competitive sporting fixtures at school. Even more, 81%, do not regularly compete against pupils from other schools. In place of competitive sports, state schools offer activities at which girls tend to do well. 32% of schools teach cheer-leading, one in five offer trampolining or yoga.⁶⁸

Along with literacy and discipline, competitive sport has been jettisoned for ideological reasons. A formidable group of educators contend that competition threatens the emotional well-being of children. Romsey MP, Sandra Gidley summed up this attitude when she declared competitive sports her ‘pet hate.’ She wanted them replaced with, ‘something much more positive and inspiring for children than those in which their performance is compared with that of others.’ She envisaged a

⁶⁸ DCFS, *School Sport Survey 2008/09*, 2009.

bright, non-competitive tomorrow of, 'skipping, dance and games.'⁶⁹

In the Isle of Thanet Amateur Boxing club, five 16 year old boys were certainly skipping but otherwise the place had all the hallmarks of Sandra Gidley's pet hate. Boys were sparring in a boxing ring, practising their punches on the 'Slam Mans' or getting tuition from the older boys and Neil Leach, the boxing coach who had started the club. Under an imaginative scheme run by Thanet local council, youngsters receive vouchers for a range of sports including these boxing lessons. The local council officer explained, 'A lot of kids are hanging about because they have no money, nothing to do and nowhere to go.'

A group of fathers explained the club's attraction. One said, 'I bring my son here three times a week because his primary school doesn't do nearly enough.' He described a typical weekly PE lesson for eight year olds. 'They stand in a circle and throw a ball at one another! Then they jump through hoops! And here I have got a normal, active son who wants to kick a ball and be on a team.' Another father explained, when he was at school, 'we had all the sports.' But now, 'They don't do anything. They don't have clubs after school because the teachers want to go home.' A third father interrupted, ' Even the football has to include girls and be non-competitive! How can football be non-competitive?' The first father called over his nine year old son, a keen boxer, and told him to describe what he had done in his one PE lesson that week. 'We walked around with a bean bag on our head,' he replied.

Government ministers have made repeated promises to put sport at the heart of the curriculum. They have invested £1.5

⁶⁹ *The Daily Echo*, 11 December 2006.

billion to boost physical education in schools. Yet nearly a million children are doing less than the two hours a week of PE and sport recommended by the Government.⁷⁰

At the same time the Government has been selling off playing fields at the rate of almost one a day since Labour came to power. 2,540 school and community sites have concreted over pitches since 1997.⁷¹

There are other problems. For example, a teacher in a school in the north east wanted to offer a cadet's course after school, an idea popular with his pupils. The school is new and with impressive facilities. Unfortunately under the PFI scheme, the PFI contractor owns the land. The school has to pay the PFI contractor in order to use the school's facilities after 5pm or during holidays. The school does not offer after school activities because it cannot afford the fees. The teacher then came up with the idea of a DJ bus in the school car park. The police, delighted to be let off the usual tussle with the boys in the local spinney, offered to chaperone the evening. They planned to end it at 9pm and have no alcohol. Even so the PFI contractor refused permission. Instead of the children, adults use the school's facilities in the evening and at weekends. 'The result,' explained the teacher, 'there is not a lot to do for our kids. The youth club is too far away. We are not allowed to hold activities after school and there is nothing going on here over the summer holidays.'

⁷⁰ *The Sun*, 3 January 2008.

⁷¹ DfEs, *Schools Sports Survey 2005/06*, 2006.

State school lack of interest in sport does teenage boys a great disservice. The lack of exercise affects their behaviour and concentration. At one primary school in the East End of London I watched a PE class of seven year olds. The girls picked their way carefully along a bench then stepped off the end. The boys pushed and shoved with barely constrained impatience. In the staff room the teachers complained that the boys misbehaved every afternoon. They saw this as immutable. Like the weather, it could not be changed. I suggested the PE teacher organise a game of football every lunch break. Exhausted boys would concentrate better and not spend the afternoon in the corridor missing lessons. The teachers looked at me as if I was talking an alien language. But then they were all female and at least two stone over weight.

How closely exercise is linked to behaviour and school work is clear from the success of the Advance Skills Academy Liverpool. This provides five hours of lessons, drill and exercise to youngsters who have been excluded from school. It offers teenagers an opportunity to take part in a structured, challenging and disciplined program designed to bring out qualities which, as its director, Chris Pover remarked, 'have often gone unnoticed.' These are violent and difficult boys no school wanted.

What did they enjoy about the course? All mentioned the daily exercise with a field outing once a week to test the skills they had learnt. A large, adolescent with cropped blond hair explained he used to hang around the streets every night until two or three am 'getting into trouble with the police.' Now he was in bed by 11 pm. 'After all those press ups I am knackered.'

Another 15 year old, small for his age and expelled from six schools, described with relish the ambush organised on the

sand dunes the day before. Afterwards they had climbed the dunes and raced down, several times, very fast, falling head over heels. His face beamed with pleasure. He too had changed his behaviour and went to bed early now. 'I can hardly keep my eyes open,' he said happily. 'There are no more problems with me'.

Another boy remarked the daily exercise, 'Calms me down. It helps me concentrate on the school work.' One 16 year old explained his new found discipline and physical capability had so surprised his uncle, 'that he is now ready to help me get a job on an oil rig.'

Exercise in itself is not enough. Attitude is all important. Teenage boys want their sport treated seriously. They want instructors who they respect to set standards in which they can take pride in trying to achieve. The majority of teenage boys complained of indifferent teachers and sports facilities. Two teenage boys blamed their sport teacher 'He's just doin the basics, five a side. No one can be bothered. It's boring because no one turns up.'

This even proved the case in a new Sports Academy. It boasted an architecturally designed building surrounded by pitches. When I asked by what sports criteria they chose pupils, the teacher said in a shocked voice, 'That would be selection!' It was my turn to be astounded. Did that mean the Sports Academy took pupils who might have no interest in sport? What then was the point of a specialisation? 'Well we can't have selection,' she replied firmly. A woman living nearby said she never saw children using the sport's facilities after school. 'It's all used by adults paying £45 an hour,' she said.

What sets a good school apart is the range of activities on offer and the serious level at which they are pursued. I joined a group

from an estate in Streatham for a game of rounders. As we walked to the pitch – a patch of grass by the railway line – the youngest boy aged 11 explained he had just been expelled from school for punching his teacher, ‘She was in hospital for two weeks,’ he added with satisfaction. He was carrying our only rounders bat which he now began to wave about. I said hitting his teacher was outrageous behaviour. He looked surprised. He was obviously not used to being told off. ‘He can’t help himself,’ his friend said kindly, ‘He’s got ADHD’ (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). The boy gave a small, smug smile. The game of rounders was very enjoyable. But at the end a lanky 16 year old of mixed race shook his head sadly, ‘Rounders,’ he said, ‘is the easiest game.’ For him enjoyment was not enough. He craved something else.

This does not have to be sport but it does have to be something. In one art room a young man showed me a beautiful nude he had done in blue chalk. He was obviously gifted. ‘I used to do drugs. Now I am into drawing,’ he said with pleasure. The more a school can offer, drama, music, art, sport, the more chance a young man has of finding something at which he can excel. They give schools a vibrancy which goes a long way to solving the problem of exclusion and discipline. The retired head of one successful state school recalled a boy from the local estate sauntering past, a violin slung over one shoulder, football boots over the other. He believed the application and hard work required from an early age for these activities creates, ‘a catalyst in the school which drags up all the other subjects’.

One lunch break in a inner-city primary school I was left with the two worst behaved boys that morning. They were aged eight. Joel was frequently violent but when I showed him a book on castles he asked intelligent questions. David was from a large family. His uniform was torn and dirty. In class he did not appear

to understand what was going on but wondered aimlessly about. I discovered he could barely read. When I set them a still life to draw, he showed real ability. These two boys both possessed talents that could have been the making of them. Instead they were already two statistics of failure.

The absence of sport at school is compounded by the absence of youth clubs. 'On this estate there's nae rugby, nae football,' said a young man from Newcastle, 'There were football,' he amended, 'but there's nae pitches.' Their problem was their estate was not run down enough. A nearby estate, 'they get loads of facilities but we get nute.' Another young man said 'we are not classed as underprivileged so we don't attract interest.' One teenager explained there was a pitch near him but they charged £15 an hour – beyond their means. He said, 'It gets you dune to be honest.'

Eight out of ten parents and six out of ten teenagers complain there is not enough for young people to do in their area.⁷² Seven out of ten teenagers believe that young people are involved in anti-social behaviour because they are bored.⁷³

Most teenagers get bored immediately after school. A third of 11 to 16 year olds regularly return to an empty house. Boredom can lead to drugs, drinking and crime. A fifth of school pupils aged 11 to 15 who had taken drugs more than once said they had done so because, 'I had nothing better to do'. One woman who runs a youth club in Islington explained she had raised funds from the local shops. Why had they contributed? She replied, 'I hold my club on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. On those

⁷² Audit Commission, op. cit.

⁷³ 4Children, *Transforming the Offer for Young People in the UK*, 2007.

days there is no shoplifting.' As Jimmy in Newcastle remarked, 'I got stabbed on Friday night. If we had something to do it would not have happened.'

In the absence of organised activities, teenage boys hang around on the street. The British Crime Survey has consistently registered public disquiet over this aspect of teenage behaviour. Almost all of the adults who complained about the issue were commenting from experience. Half said they saw young people hanging around every day at a particular time – in the evening and around certain shops and street corners. They complain that these youngsters show them no respect, are inconsiderate, noisy, drunk and threatening.⁷⁴

In contrast, 12 to 15 year olds see hanging around on a street corner as normal behaviour. Teenagers want to be with other teenagers. They feel safer in a large group. They want to be independent and socialise with friends, free of adult supervision and free of charge. We fail to provide them with the opportunity. In a recent survey of young people aged 16 to 19, 72% wanted to get involved in activities rather than hang around home or the street. Either they are too expensive or they do not exist.

Boys with nothing else to do and no where to go, kick a ball around on the street. A group in Newcastle explained what happens. Neighbours called the police who would move them along. So they played in the small, local park. But here mothers of younger children got nervous and complained. The boys tried playing in the park at night. Again the police got called. The boys said, 'Every place you go the police come and move you

⁷⁴ J K Flatley et al, *Perceptions of Anti-Social Behaviour: Findings from the 2007/8 British Crime Survey*, Home Office, 2007.

on. They just shoutin at us. It becomes so frustrating.’ Another interrupted, ‘So you go into a field the police grab you and take out, proper shouting at you. You can’t get in a word. They are just shouting.’ Other young men shook their heads. All they wanted was, ‘just somewhere to get a team together.’

At a community centre in Streatham it was the same story. Inside motivated black girls were on the centre’s 12 computers. But apart from the computers there was nothing else to do in the small room despite frequent calls to Lambeth council for funding. ‘We got the kids but they won’t help us provide for them,’ said the youth leader.

The boys hung around outside smoking spiffs, spitting and mumbling into their mobiles. I asked an 18 year old black youth with a silver tooth and stars shaved about his head where he exercised. He pointed at the road. He said, ‘The street’s the only place. There is nothing to do with our spare time. But black youths like us try and play football in the street and everyone is complaining.’

A month later I met up with these boys again. They had been banned from the youth club. Instead they had gathered in the kitchen of a hostel in Brixton. About eight of them were learning up against the units, smoking spiffs. The room was thick with the smell. They had nothing planned for the day, they admitted, but a little crime.

7. GOOD ALTERNATIVES

It does not have to be like this. There are organisations who understand teenage boys and offer them what they need in these crucial years.

Giving young people something to do does not have to cost money. It does require courage and imagination as two private clubs have recently demonstrated.

The Hockey Club in Kent and the Gateshead Golf Club both suffered from vandalism. In Gateshead young people attacked players and stole golf balls and equipment. In the Hockey Club vandals damaged the £500,000 astroturf pitch. The Chairman of the Hockey Club decided, 'As a major sports club in the area we recognised that we have a role to play in the community. Being confrontational and shutting out local lads was going to cause far more problems than engagement. Some lads are a problem, a few lads are a real problem but the vast majority just want to kick a ball around. They appreciate any gesture that allows them to do this.'

When the club did a refit in 2007 they decided to cut two unofficial entrances into the fence around the pitch for the kids. The

manufacturer, he recalled, was 'gobsmacked.' The club then left on the flood lights every Saturday night throughout the winter. The local youth club alerted its members by text and kept an eye on them. Now about 20 to 30 turn up regularly and play football.

The Gateshead Golf Club tried a similar approach. They asked the vandals what they wanted. Many were interested in playing golf. So they club provided free lessons and equipment.⁷⁵ By the summer of 2008 nearly a hundred young people were involved with the club. Some are now good enough to become future professionals. Others have agreed to become ambassadors to show their peers how golf can change lives. In the Kent Hockey Club last summer the local PSCO organised a seven aside summer league with a large shield presented to the winners. This brought youngsters from all over the area together. 'We thought there were going to be punch ups,' remarked the Chairman, 'But there no problems and no damage'

The Chairman explained to the boys how much the facility cost and the efforts the police and youth club were making. The boys show their appreciation. 'Now if anyone drops something, the others tell him to pick it up. They are even happy to help with the odd chores like stringing up the nets.' He said the boys responded well to kindness and politeness. 'Be rude and confrontational and that's what you get back. We have had very little vandalism.' The chairman continued, 'We are a hockey club. We are not in the business of running a football club for kids but we have made it our business and it has been a big success. A few boys are even getting interested in hockey.' Both clubs agreed their initiatives were cheaper than the security required to keep the boys out.

⁷⁵ Audit Commission, op. cit.

Their experience proves that given something to do, the majority of teenagers seize the opportunity. Vandalism and crime are substitutes for a lack of anything better. 'They are only cause trouble,' said Neil Leach who runs a boxing club in the Isle of Thanet, 'because they have got no money, nothing to do and nowhere to go.'

Organisations that deal successfully with boys made the same point again and again. It is a cheering one. Give teenage boys what they need, and the majority cease to be a problem.

What do young men need? A brigadier in the Army Cadet Force explained, 'A troublesome, young person walks through our door and straightaway senses a structure and an organisation where people respect one another. However difficult they are, they melt almost immediately. We show them respect. We try and find out what they are good at. We encourage and praise them. It's no great secret.'

A Captain involved in the cadet's Out Reach programme in the north east, pointed out that many boys only receive recognition from their peers. What they need is the approval of adult men. 'We set challenges that are non-confrontational and about problem solving. It is all very structured and disciplined. We are careful to explain you will do this because this is the benefit and this is what you will get out of it.' Another man said, 'we rarely get into a confrontation with them. People are friendly but firm.' Another instructor commented, 'These boys are not that difficult to engage. Their social worker tells us they are dangerous and unmanageable. We feed them, praise them let them know what they are doing and why, and they thrive. We find them no trouble.' Another man said, 'It's a very simple model really. We could be teaching them knitting.'

All stressed the importance of praise. 'No one,' said the captain, 'ever pats them on the back with a well done, that was excellent.' Neil Leach who runs the boxing club in Kent agreed. 'So many don't know how to respond to a well done because no one has ever praised them. They get no praise at home and no discipline. We give them both.'

Certainly they do not appear to get either from schools or parents as a report from the Prince's Trust makes clear. Only half of children excluded from school could recall being praised by their parents compared to two thirds of their non excluded peers. Excluded children were also twice as likely to say that had never been disciplined at home.⁷⁶

A teacher explained why he found his task so difficult. 'To the average teenage boy structure and discipline equals freedom. For example you can expend yourself in a football match in a way you can't in a street fight.' The teacher went on, 'As a grown up and a teacher I should be taking responsibility. All this talk of providing choice and freedom for children is simply off-loading our responsibilities as adults onto them. For young males too much choice is oppressive.'

The young men I interviewed were delighted they had something to do which now won them praise. Previously their energy and enthusiasm had only got them into trouble. Many of the organisations held leaving parades to which teachers, social workers and parents were invited. The brigadier said, 'They are amazed at the transformation in the lad. Most can't believe it.'

⁷⁶ J Clayden and M Stein, Princes Trust, *The way it is: Young people on race school exclusion and leaving care*, 2002.

All the organisations emphasized food. 'What happens in the school lunch break?' said the brigadier in disgust, 'They wander around the streets with a can of coke, a packet of crisps and a Mars Bar.' On the week's outreach programme organised by the cadets, for example, they get a proper cooked meal – a choice of four mains and four deserts. The brigadier recalled, 'One young man could not believe he could have all that food.' The result is, he went on, 'By day five they don't want to go home. They have found new friends. They have had three meals a day. Adults talk to them and respond to their questions. They feel safe, secure and they have companionship.'

Too many young men are not getting these basic requirements from either school or home. The brigadier said, 'I personally believe they crave it. You know by how well they respond. You tell them off. You praise them. You feed them. It is really not rocket science.'

A number of young men explained the attraction of an organisation like the cadets. The cadets itself is entirely separate from the army and staffed by volunteers. They give three nights a week, two weekends a month and a 14 day annual camp in the Easter holidays. One young man said his mother was 'really loving but there was no structure at home. Three nights a week I went away. I knew where I was going to be. When I was there I had good influences on me.' Another young man recalled when he started truanting his mother called his Colonel who told him not to bother coming to cadets. He returned to school and got his GCSEs. 'God knows where I would be now. I dread to think.'

Shaun Bailey, the charismatic black prospective Conservative MP was brought up by a single mother on a North Kensington Estate. He put down part of his success to joining the Army Cadet Force at the age of 12 'that really rescued me. Getting

into the Cadets created the person I am today. Straight away I had a different version of how men are.' His friends were not told that there was a consequence for bad behaviour. 'I was.' He could have easily joined his friends committing crime but 'I was literally too busy.' When they got caught burgling a factory one weekend, 'I was running up and down Salisbury Plain, training.' The Cadets Outreach programme which works out at £350 a head receives no government funds.

Many young men pointed out that crime is a social activity. As one remarked, 'you smoke a little joint together then go out and do it together. It's a bonding thing.' Giving up crime is so hard for a teenage boy because it means giving up your friends. Cadets and similar organisations offer an alternative community.

Few of the youth club leaders had a good word for YOT teams, social workers or teachers. As one said, 'They talk the jargon – a lot about "identifying the right stakeholder" – but when it comes down to giving up one weekend a year they won't do it.' Another pointed out that the police, who have to deal with the young men, 'will go a tremendous distance.' Social workers and youth offending teams, however, display the professionally correct, 'disengaged view'. One man explained, 'They make plenty of excuses for why youths are failing. But they prefer to fill up bits of paper then actually do something about it.'

This particular instructor is keen to follow up the boys and learn how successful his course has been. He gets told, 'Oh he's not attending any more. Sorry we can't help you but he's no longer on our books.' He shook his head sadly. 'The YOT team see the young person as a bit of paper that gets passed on. In the Cadets once you join the family, you stay in the family right through to the grave.' At that moment he had two young men living on site until they 'sorted themselves out'.

9. CONSEQUENCES

‘We got a lot of baggage – more baggage than Heathrow’

The failure of schools to get a grip on young boys has far reaching consequences for them and society. Boys disaffected by school simply do not turn up or behave so badly that they are excluded. Boys are meant to stay in school now until their 18th birthday. But as Sir Mike Tomlinson, former head of Ofsted, pointed out around one in every 24 pupils, aged 14 and 15 ‘fall off the rolls’ before starting their GCSEs in Year 10. Sir Mike, now a Government adviser on London schools said, ‘At 14 they are voting with their feet and saying “actually school has nothing for me”’. In general terms we don’t know where they are.’ It was ‘very worrying.’⁷⁷

Pupils who are not in school quickly find themselves on the edge of society. In a study by the charity Centrepont over three quarters of homeless teenagers were either long-term truants or were excluded from school. This is hardly surprising when only

⁷⁷ *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 2009.

15% of white boys qualifying for free school meals finish compulsory schooling having mastered the three Rs.

Once again, truancy is a problem that most affects disadvantaged boys in their early teens. The number of school meals – an indication of poverty – reflects truancy rates. In Welsh secondary schools, for example, where more than 30% of pupils have free school meals unauthorised absence rates are six times the national average. In Scotland it is four times.

In England almost 60,000 children skip lessons every day. Around 44,000 pupils are classed as ‘persistent’ truants because they miss almost half their lessons. A further 305,000 are at risk of joining the problem group. Ofsted points out that attendance is poor in just under half of all secondary schools.

Parents influence attendance. Excluded children often come from families with a step parent or from single parent families. Only one in four children who have been excluded lives with both parents compared with three in five of their non-excluded peers. The majority of the teenage boys I interviewed had no adult to ensure they got up in the morning, went to school or did their homework.

Schools cannot lay all the blame on parents. Over half of pupils in one survey listed school factors for why they first played truant. 67% of all truants were absent from school in order to avoid a particular lesson or teacher. Many of the youngsters I interviewed, for example, truanted to avoid their English teacher. ‘All that reading!’ said one in disgust, ‘Why does she make me do the reading when she know I can’t?’

The urge to excel in front of their peers overwhelms boys as they hit adolescence. If they are consistently humiliated in the class room and adults fail to provide an alternative activity, they

are left with just two options. They fight or they take flight. It is not therefore surprising that the peak age for exclusion and truancy is 14.

Jake's own lack of literacy led to bad behaviour and truanting at 14. He recalled a typical morning. His school would 'hassle' him to attend. He would turn up and almost in the first lesson find himself dispatched to the exclusion room. This was usually done by a female teacher 'over-reacting' to what he considered harmless 'back chat.' He was supposed to spend the day in the exclusion room. 'So it went like this. 8.45 arrive in school. 9.30 in isolation.' Within half an hour, 'my mates, always the same ten lads, would join me.' They had all been sent to the exclusion room for bad behaviour. 'We have a good laugh about it, then take off.' The staff would stand at the school gates to 'discourage us' from leaving but, 'they had no authority. We would walk past them laughing.'

Once again the Government's desire to look good takes precedence over tackling the problem. Schools admit to 'laundering' their truancy and exclusions figures.⁷⁸ They do this by recording unauthorised absences as authorised. This allows the political administration to claim they are cracking the truancy problem. But as a head teacher said the government is 'not cracking the truancy problem. What the schools are doing on their behalf is cracking the statistics problem.'⁷⁹

⁷⁸ R Webb and G Vulliamy, *A multi-Agency Approach to Reducing Disaffection and Exclusions from School*, 2008.

⁷⁹ H Malcolm et al, *Absence from School: A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs*, Scottish Council for Research in Education, University of Glasgow, 2003.

The majority of teenagers I interviewed were not in school or only there intermittently. Boys who disrupt the class and have no hope of getting a qualification are unwelcome. One said, 'The teachers were relieved when I didn't turn up.'

One young man explained why he had truanted and how it had affected his future. At 12, Chris was the youngest in his class and small for his age. Older boys in his year began to bully him. His single mother complained to the school. Chris recalled, 'At first it was mental bullying but when the school did nothing, it turned physical.

The bigger boys in his year, 'would pick me up and pass me round. I was embarrassed and humiliated.' Lonely and desperate to belong, he got in with a group of boys who were part of a local gang, 'bordering on criminality.' The gang members at school began to 'watch out for me.' This escalated the violence.

One afternoon he found himself on his own in a classroom. He was about to leave when two of the bullies came in, saw him then turned around and locked the door. His heart sank. At that point, 'two lads from my gang,' passed and happened to glance in. 'When they spotted what was going on, they kicked the door down' and set upon his tormentors. There was an almighty punch up. The school, desperate for its reputation, hushed things up but, again, did nothing about the bullying.

Shortly afterwards two of the bullies cornered him in a chemistry lesson, held him down and banged his head against the counter. Chris recalled, 'The teacher was in another world with the other students. He did not even notice.' Chris wriggled free, picked up a stool and brought it down hard on the head of one of the bullies. This time the teacher did notice and sent Chris to the head, 'but I never got bullied again,' said Chris with satisfaction.

The school told Chris he could face criminal charges. He was excluded from school for three weeks and from class for two months. No action was taken against the bullies. Chris was left in a room on his own with work to do. He said, 'You don't learn like that. That is not an education. I lost interest.' By the time he was allowed back in class, it was too late. 'I was in the wrong crowd.' By his GSCE year his attendance rate was less than half. He explained, 'My mum is not a strong character. She urged me to go to school but there was no way I would go.' The school did nothing. He spent his days and nights hanging round on street corners with his criminal friends. His life only turned around when he joined the cadets. They encouraged him to return to school and get his GCSEs. He is now training to be a policeman.

One young man described the effect this had on his life. He had arrived in secondary with a low reading ability. He received no help. 'By Year 9 I had done three years in secondary school and I was not a good deal better than when I arrived' By Year 9 and 10 at age 14 – the key age for dropping out, 'The was game was over for the lot of us. We didn't want to know.' School now became part time. Truancy merged effortlessly into criminal behaviour. He explained, 'I would go in for two hours in the morning then walk out about 11 or 12 then crack on with the rest of the day – whatever that entailed – burglary, vandalism, drugs.'

Another from the Midlands said, 'English was a joke to us. We knew we were shit at it so we just wouldn't go.' They snuck off to the loos or hall. When a teacher caught them and told them to go to class they waved cheerily, 'Year mate, see you later.' In South London Crusher had a similar reaction to his English class, 'So you think I might as well bunk school and go to do a bit of thieving.'

From being a problem for their school, these boys now became a problem for their community and the police. Teenage boys with nothing to do, with no outlet for their aggression and no supervision, commit crime. 40% of street crime, 25% of burglaries, 20% of criminal damage and a third of car thefts are carried out by 10 to 16 year olds at times when they should be in school.⁸⁰

Boys excluded from school are more likely to carry a weapon than those who are not. In 2004 MORI found 9% of children in school compared to 30% of excluded children said they had carried a flick knife.⁸¹ Three out of ten murders are done with a sharp instrument. The most likely person to be equipped with a knife is a boy aged 14 to 19. And the most likely of all is an excluded school boy.

Good schools can make all the difference. A study commissioned by the Home Office discovered that attachment to school protects children – especially boys aged 12 to 16 – from criminal activity. Success and achievement in school is an ever greater protector.

A community worker in Newcastle said sadly, 'There is not enough done for our young men. They crash and burn badly.' A nineteen year old recently released from prison nodded, 'We got a lot of baggage – more baggage than Heathrow.'

⁸⁰ Estelle Morris MP, then Education Secretary, BBC News, 29 April 2002.

⁸¹ A Phillips and C Chaberalain, *MORI Five-Year Report: An analysis of Youth Survey Data*. Youth Justice Board, 2006.

10. GANGS AND CRIME

‘Nothing frightened us. We were untouchable and we knew it’

In the vacuum left by parents, schools and youth clubs many of the young men I interviewed had turned to gangs and were committing crime. Gangs and crime finally gave them what they craved – a close knit group, protection and an occupation which allowed them to prove themselves and into which they could pour all their energy and enthusiasm.

Barbara Wilding, South Wales Chief Constable said that ‘in areas of extreme deprivation’ feral groups ‘of very angry young people’ have turned to gangs when their parents let them down. She went on, ‘Tribal loyalty has replaced family loyalty and gang culture based on violence and drugs is a way of life.’⁸²

This was certainly true of Tuggy Tug. Six months after meeting him, I returned to find the same group of boys hanging around outside the chicken takeaway in Brixton. At 16 Tuggy Tug and his two closest friends, Mash and Crumble are part of a 20-strong South London gang. They and their friends eagerly

⁸² *The Daily Mail*, 8 August 2008.

described their crimes, waving their arms around and shrugging up their hoodies to make themselves appear bigger. 'Oh year,' they said, 'we do the stabbin and the shootin.' Despite the hard language, they looked small and pinched. I asked if they were hungry. The bravado abruptly vanished. 'We are always hungry,' they said. No adult appeared to look after them – let alone feed them. 'My mum sometimes gives me money for a packet of crisps,' one volunteered. Others had been kicked out of home by their mothers or taken into care. Later, in a restaurant over chicken and ice cream, the three boys explained what being part of a gang meant to them. In the absence of parents, it offered both protection and emotional support. Tuggy Tug said of his companions, 'I get more from these two than I ever did from my family.'

Tuggy Tug and his friends are not alone. Young boys feel let down by the adults in their lives. British children spend less time with their parents than other European countries. In a recent MORI poll 24% of children complained their parents are not always there when they need them. In another survey, 49% of parents did not know where their children were, who they were with or what they did after school, at weekends or during the holidays. Young people spend more time hanging around together, aimless and unsupervised, than ever before. It is a phenomenon peculiar to Britain. 45% of 15 year old boys spent four or more evenings a week in 2001/2002 'with friends' compared to 31% of boys in Sweden and just 17% of boys in France.⁸³

⁸³ J Margo and M Dixon, *op. cot.*

The absence of a caring parent has a profound effect on teenagers. A third of those questioned by the Prince's Trust in a survey of 1,754 14 to 25 year olds do not have a parent who they consider a role model.⁸⁴ 58% joined a gang to acquire a sense of identity while a quarter were in search of someone to look up to. Mash said parents, 'are just a roof over my head. My mother always said to me, "from 16 you are gone."'

Martina Milburn, Chief Executive of The Prince's Trust comments, 'All the threads that hold a community together – a common identity, role models, a sense of safety – were given by young people as motivations to join a gangs. Our research suggests that young people are creating their own "youth communities" and gangs in search of the influences that could once have been found in traditional communities.'

The absence of parents is compounded by the lack of an authority figure outside the home. Young teenagers join gangs, they explained, because they are afraid. There is nobody else to protect them, certainly no responsible adult. 'you don't start off as a killer,' said a 19 year old leader from Kilburn, 'but you get bullied on the street. So you go to the gym and you end up a fighter, a violent person. All you want is for them to leave you alone but they push you and push you.' Another boy aged 13 explained that in his area in West London boys 'would do anything' to join a gang. If they join a gang with 'a big name' people will 'look at them differently, be scared of them.'

Every one of the teenagers I interviewed had been mugged at least once. They spoke of older brothers involved in regular violence and shootings. One had been stabbed twice in the arm

⁸⁴ The Prince's Trust, *The Culture of Youth Communities*, 2008.

that night. They felt vulnerable and unprotected by the adult world. Jim at a school in Newcastle remarked 'a lot of me friends have been mugged, just loads of people.'

The Home Office admits that young men aged 16 to 26 are most at risk of being a victim of violent crime. But only recently did a Freedom of Information request to each of the 43 police forces reveal that four out of 10 muggings are committed by children under 16 – and that is only the ones reported. 51% of victims do not report the crime to the police and 45% do not even tell their parents.⁸⁵

This may make crime figures look good and the Government look good. But how can protecting young people on the streets take priority when the Home Office refused to acknowledge the number of crimes against them? It is no wonder one young gang member said, 'There's no one to look after me but me.' He is quite right.

Too many schools display the same indifference. Humiliated and angry, the boys join gangs. They remain in them because they are qualified for little else other than, as Mash pointed out, 'drug dealing and robbing.'

PC Robert Pritchard, the schools' officer covering the gangs involved in the murder of Rhys Jones, pointed out that 'a lot of them see that life has just left them by. They have not achieved anything from an education point of view.' When he asked them what they wanted to do in the future, they just laughed and replied, 'What are we going to do without an education?' He went on, 'Most of them can't even read or write. It's quite sad.'

⁸⁵ Youth Justice Board, *Youth Survey*, 2002 .

This meant, 'A lot of them have low self-esteem. They don't like themselves and they think it's difficult to get out of these gangs they are in.'⁸⁶

Without education, they have only crime. As one youth worker remarked, 'What am I supposed to tell a gang member? Give up the lifestyle and the hundreds you're making every week, and live like a tramp. Because they know I'm lying if I say I can turn their lives around any time soon.'⁸⁷

So, what is life like for the teenager involved in gangs and crime? White or black their experiences appear remarkably similar. After the frustration of school, many found it a welcome challenge. Their voices immediately changed. Their faces glistened with excitement and pride. One white gang member said, 'it's all money and hustle and bustle for us.'

Darren is white, in his early twenties and unemployed. He has a large diamond stud in one ear. He grew up in a small town in Lincolnshire. He failed to learn to read or write properly although obviously bright. At around 11 or 12 'I started small time shop lifting, silly stupid things.' He stole from supermarkets, 'just for the sake of stealing.' He soon discovered the advantages of stealing in a group. 'No one was going to stop six or seven lads in black bomber jacket and hats.' He joined up with the other nine or ten boys in his year group who had all started secondary school barely able to read and write. They began to do everything together.

Teenage boys have a natural urge to belong to a group. When they look around for one to join too often their only option is the

⁸⁶ *The Sunday Times*, 2 September 2007.

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 28 August 2008.

local gang. With their hierarchy and strict discipline street gangs are nothing more than a distorted mirror image of a sports team or the house system common in private schools where loyalty and team effort are all important. As one young gang leader from Kilburn chillingly told me. 'You have to know the people, you have to trust the people, because you do everything together. When you stab you stab together.'

In Brixton Mash, Crumble and Tuggy Tug also emphasized the importance of co-operation, 'We are all linked together. We all bring something to the table. One got a knock out punch. Another good with a knife. We all got our little role.' Tuggy Tug pointed to Crumble who is small and slight and looks no more than 12, 'if I ever get into a problem, it's him I look to. I know he won't just gas the man. This one, he finish the problem. He go the full 100%. He skank (stab) the man.' Crumble carried on eating his ice cream imperturbably. Tuggy Tug continued, 'Everyone got something. We just a mad team.'

Like any public school, they believed team spirit vital for success. Tuggy Tug explained, 'Most boys our age, they not thinking. They do it by themselves.' Mash interrupted 'You don't make it in this bad boy business on your own. You get robbed. You get a beef by yourself, you in trouble.'

The three boys had obviously put a lot of thought into their activities. Apart from team effort, they believed in moderation. Most boys were either too 'half-hearted' or went 'over the top'. They took the middle course. Then when other boys did make money they 'splashed it around.' Mash said contemptuously, 'They don't invest in nothing. You got to invest for success.' I asked what they invested in. 'Skunk and guns,' replied Mash promptly.

In Lincolnshire, Darren recalled life got more serious when they discovered a fence, 'not difficult in a small town' and were no longer stealing just for kicks. They were now making sometimes a £100 a day. Tuggy Tug also emphasized the importance of their 'links' – defined by Crumble 'as anyone who help me move forward in my life'. Their fence is a white student living in a leafy suburb. He texts them a list of what he wants stolen, 'DVDs, lap tops, mobile phones, Sat Navs,' said Crumble. Disabled Parking Badges appear particularly popular.

The fear of getting caught is not a deterrent. Both white and black gangs view the criminal justice system as ineffective as their school and parents. When Darren and his friends were arrested they soon learnt to call a solicitor. 'We quickly worked out that half the time the police would let us go.' Even if they did get to the youth court they received no more than a £50 fine. Darren dismissed this as 'a complete joke.'

In order to pay the fine, Darren and his gang had to appear in court in the neighbouring town. This meant they were out of action for the day. 'So that's what we would say to each other, "I got a day off tomorrow because I got to go to court." We looked on it as a holiday.' He shrugged, 'We knew they never send you to prison before 18 because it costs too much.'

The three boys in Brixton also had scant respect for the law but for a different reason. Racial prejudice banned from public life, is still alive and well in the criminal justice system. They explained they would never steal from a white, middle class person like myself because, 'We touch you, it's a jail sentence.' Instead they targeted, 'a little black man walking with his spiff. We rob him because we know the police won't take it further.'

They described their last venture. They had burgled a drug dealer in a hostel. With the same pride other boys describe scoring a try in a rugby match, Tuggy Tug related the difficulties of avoiding the security cameras, breaking into the dealer's room and finding the £1,700 in cash. On the way out, they were spotted by a passer by who called the police. Tuggy Tug said, 'We were running from the Feds, jumpin over fences. There were police, dogs, a helicopter ...'

They were arrested and bailed. Tuggy Tug patted his stomach sadly, 'If we had that money I would have eaten every day in a good restaurant like this. But the Feds got it.' Despite being caught red handed, 'we got NFA (No Further Action),' said Mash in stupefaction. The Crown Prosecution Service decided not to proceed with the case. A week afterwards, 'A policewoman stopped us in the street,' said Crumble, 'She said it was because we robbed people who were doin bad tings like ourselves.' So that made it all right. This lack of interest extends throughout the criminal justice system. In 2006, for example, only nine of the 6,314 people convicted of carrying a knife were given the maximum sentence.⁸⁸

Darren also discovered the police were powerless. 'Four or five of us were arrested three times in two weeks.' They went to the police station, got a solicitor and replied, 'No comment,' to every accusation. 'The police were trying to put pressure on you but they couldn't because the solicitor was there.' They saw getting arrested as 'part of the game – that's the way we felt about it,' Darren found himself at his local police station so often he felt, 'at home there'. He even said breezily to the charging sergeant,

⁸⁸ *The Times*, 26 May 2008.

‘No worries. I’ll take myself down to the cells.’ He explained, ‘I know which cell to go to. The charging sergeant shouts out after me, ‘Don’t forget to shut the door!’ ”

What kind of crime were they committing? Tuggy Tug and his friends mainly steal from teenagers slightly older than themselves – a dangerous occupation for them and us. Revengeful 19 year olds have no inhibitions about using guns in public places during the day. Crumble had been shot at twice outside the B&Q in Norwood. ‘The car pulled up on this big, high road,’ said Tuggy Tug, ‘the sun shining and then pop, pop.’ A friend and fellow gang member, also 16, had been shot in front of them the week before. Crumble said, ‘You never seen anything like it in your life. Half his head had gone. His face had proper dissolved, man.’

Darren said committing crime between the ages of 14 to 17 gave him the buzz and satisfaction other boys get from sport or school. He went on, ‘Every day it was a different challenge. We were very competitive. So first of all we worked out who had made the most money the day before. Then we discussed how we were going to make money today and how we planned to get away with it.’

He went on, ‘we would steal anything’. In one hour they had removed the wheels from a BMW and sold them for a £150. They soon moved into drugs. He explained, ‘For me it was a natural progression from petty vandalism and trashing bus shelters to selling cocaine and ecstasy.’ They did not use drugs much themselves and had scant respect for the local dealers but they enjoyed the challenge of distributing them. He recalled how he and three of his friends organised themselves in order to successfully sell ‘sweeties’ to the queues outside nightclubs with, ‘two sellers and two spotters.’

How did they judge success? All three boys in Brixton eagerly turned out their pockets. Each had at least three mobile phones, 'Everything, boxers, socks, I bought myself,' Crumble said proudly. They had no parent to give them, 'a £100 here and there.' Tuggy Tug was clear. Money equalled status, 'The more money you got, the more ratings you got. You are the top man.' Crumble defined success as having a phone, 'ring like mad because I am busy. I got the deals.' Mash shook his head, 'if you got no money, you got nothing to sell then you are nothing. If you got something to sell then you are the man.' They discussed what they could get for a stolen Tag Huer watch but here the recession had hit and prices were falling.

Darren recalled, 'At 15 we were spending £300 over a weekend. We should not have even been in a pub at that age. At 17 other kids in school were setting up college appointments. We were making £4,000 to £5,000 a month. We kept it stashed about the place. We could do what we wanted to – buy a new car, drive it without insurance, crash it and walk away.'

In Brixton they were all determined to get mopeds for the summer. Tuggy Tug said 'If you are on a bus in summer time, you can have a hundred guns and you get no respect.' He nodded emphatically, 'I am never going to be hot and bothered on that bus.'

Why waste all this enthusiasm and effort on crime? They shook their heads at me. I did not understand. When you are 16 and without adult care, money is all important. Tuggy Tug leant forward, 'It's the worst thing in the world,' he explained, 'to wake up in the morning knowing you have not got a little £5 to eat breakfast.'

All the teenagers in both black and white gangs had trouble with their literacy and their families. Many had suffered

bereavement. Crumble and Mash had both been in care. As Darren said, 'We knew at an early age we only had each other,' Darren's parents had got divorced and he had lived with his mother until he was seven. Then she died and he moved in with his father who was working 60 hours a week as a chef. 'I saw him one hour a day.' His philosophy on child care was, 'don't get the police around and don't take drugs.' His father did not care what Darren did as long as he was home by 11pm. He himself only got back from work at 3am. Darren recalled, 'It was just too much for him. He was working long hours. He knew I was involved in certain things.' But there was little he could do about his son who at 14 was earning more than he was at 45 in a legitimate job.

Another member of the gang had 'a joke' mother who got drunk every night. Darren said, 'None of us wound him up about her'. The father of another killed himself. The newspaper splashed the story across the front page. Darren said, 'That ruined him for life, everyone knowing.' He was a small, quiet boy but after the story came out, he broke into the newspaper office, spray painted all the walls and put bricks through the windows. It was the start of a string of violent episodes. Once at school, he picked up a chair and launched at a teacher, 'really hard and fast'. Another time he went 'completely crazy' in a supermarket and began to throw bottles just because someone knocked into him.' Darren shook his head, 'He was never right after what happened to his dad.'

Whether black or white, the boys I interviewed were governed by one emotion – a desperate search for respect. Shamed in school, rejected by their parents, they turned to violence in an effort to escape often intolerable feelings of humiliation. 'Violations to self esteem through insult, humiliation or coercion' as one psychologist wrote, 'are probably the most important

source of anger and aggressive drive in humans'.⁸⁹ The young men I interviewed had nothing but their pride and dignity. They had no family, no education and no future. In this situation even the most trivial transaction, a visit to the barber's, asking for a cigarette, takes on a life and death significance. But with every other young man competing for the same affirmation, the result, says Elijah Anderson who worked in Philadelphia's ghettos for many years, is, 'thin skins and short fuses'.⁹⁰

Darren described the mentality that saw Gary Newlove beaten to death in front of his family. He said, 'Nothing frightened us. We were untouchable and we knew it.' Mostly he, like Tuggy Tug, would hang around with three or four close mates 'but when threatened we would strengthen up and take on anyone. The only thing we had was each other. In many ways we created our own family. If anyone hurt one of us they knew we would get them. Even if it took six months. Even if it was big, grown up geezers.' One of his friends was sitting on a wall outside a house. The man came out and pushed him off. He fell and hit his head on the pavement. After that Darren and his mates stood outside the man's house for two weeks 'terrorizing him and throwing rocks at his car.' The police moved them along. Six months later, six of them got the man outside a supermarket, 'we kicked the shit out of him.' It was only 'luck' they did not kill him.

Darren is now 21. What had happened to the original ten boys who had arrived in secondary school a decade earlier barely literate then dropped out and formed a gang together?

⁸⁹ S Feshbach 'The Dynamics and Morality of Biolence and Aggression', *American Psychologist*, 1971.

⁹⁰ E Anderson, *Code of the Street*, W W Norton, 1999.

Out of the ten, two are dead. One committed suicide in prison and the other smashed a stolen car into a bus shelter at 80 mph. 'That was a real wake up call, that was,' said Darren, 'That changed a lot for all of us,' Two are serving long prison sentences – one for stabbing someone in the neck. The fifth is a 'very bad' alcoholic. Three now control the drug scene in Darren's town. Darren had high hopes of his closest friend. He was a gifted football player. Every week a different football club showed interest in him. 'He really had it all at 14,' Darren recalled, 'Even when we were playing truant he had the stupid, bloody football in his ruck sack. He would bounce it off cars as we were doing our business'. Then he got hooked on crack. Last time Darren saw him he was homeless and weighed 7 stone. Darren now lives on benefits. 'But at least I am alive and not in prison,' he remarked.

Darren's friends are not alone. Recently Jon Coles, DCSF director general of schools pointed to research carried out in one northern city. Some 15% of the original, long term NEETS interviewed were dead within ten years. Jon Coles found this 'profoundly shocking. It proved the work done by schools is a 'matter of life and death.'⁹¹ It is a pity he can not get the schools in his charge to grasp the urgency.

It is clear from following Darren's nine friends the cost to society of these wasted lives. Problem parents, a lack of literacy and bad schools have led to crime, violence, drug and alcohol addiction and a life time of benefits. Educationalists, bewildered their theories have not worked, discuss the failure of our young men in sociological terms. They put it down to parents, deprivation, poverty and violent DVDs. They never criticise the school.

⁹¹ TES, 7 August 2009.

The attitude is summed up by a teacher on an online forum. He blamed failing schools squarely on 'the pond life that fills them – youngsters more interested in Playstation, drugs, football, vile so called music, pecking order hostilities amongst themselves and dissing the teachers every chance they get. Schools and teachers are just an easy target for a much more complex set of problems.'

Darren, as one of the pond life, sees it differently. 'Most of us felt both school and our parents had let us down to be honest. That is what most of us felt. We never had anyone encouraging us. "Look you are good at this or you need more help on this one." From time to time someone would help, when they could be bothered, but no one ever followed up.'

11. CONCLUSIONS

There are always going to be young men who are just bad. I sat opposite one on a train from Newcastle. He was a 22 year old Royal Marine who has done two tours of duty in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. He said cheerfully, 'I was a little arse hole before I went into the army. If I had stayed on the street, I would have got life imprisonment by now.'

There is no reason for his aggression. He comes from a loving family. His sister is a vet and his brother, an accountant. He just enjoys killing and described what it was like to get a man in his sights. He paused to open a fresh bottle of alcohol from the row lined up between us – then rang his mother for reassurance. 'I hate travelling on trains,' he admitted. At 15, a judge gave him a choice, join the army or go to prison. 'He gave me the chance to make something of my life.'

That soldier is the exception. There are a small minority of young men who are never going to fit easily into society. But the tragedy is that we are turning large numbers of potentially decent young men into misfits and criminals. Boys from poor backgrounds do not have the option of going to private school or using tutors. Our state school system is failing those most

reliant on it on a massive scale and at every level. It is failing to teach them the basics, to read and write and do simple arithmetic. It is failing to socialise them and to open up the world to the brightest.

Bigs, the former gang leader is now an entrepreneur thanks to doing a City and Guilds Accountancy course during his second prison sentence. He said, 'Schools need to work more on socialisation. We don't have parents and we need extra support. When you leave school it's a crazy world out there. They don't talk to you about that. A lot of people like me want to start our own business and be creative. School does not help us.'

We sneer at the obsession with celebrity culture, winning the lottery or getting on Big Brother. But boys from a poor background are not stupid. They know, even if we do not, that getting on Big Brother is more likely than changing their lives for the better. We have left them with no other path upwards.

It is, of course, unfair to blame schools for everything. But schools are where young men spend the majority of their time and encounter the majority of the adults in their life. They are our one opportunity to make a difference to the lives of young men and they are failing – and for reasons that could so easily be put right.

The Labour Party claims it stands for the poorest in society. But it also stands for those who serve the poor – the teacher, the social worker, the nurse. It is funded, after all, by their trade unions. Standing for the carers is not always the same thing as standing for the cared for. A weak or lazy teacher or headmaster is protected from the sack but at what cost to the child? As an Ofsted inspector remarked, 'This is their only chance of an education.'

Articulate, middle class educators have made themselves the spokesmen for our state school system. How often do we hear the voices of the parents or of the failed pupils? They tell a very different story.

The majority of teachers would prefer to work in a disciplined atmosphere where hard work and success was rewarded. At the moment, bad teachers are not sacked and ideology that has no basis in evidence goes unchallenged. Anyone who wanders into a 'bog standard' state school can only marvel at the self indulgence of our educational establishment at the expense of the future of their pupils – or of a Government who refuses to challenge those interests.

It is not hard to give teenage boys what they need to grown into successful men. The crime is we are failing to do so.

Recommendations

It is time to recognise the extent of the crisis in our schools. It is so severe and pervasive that no one set of initiatives will solve the issue. The cause of the crisis is clear – the capture of our schools and teacher training colleges by the current education orthodoxy.

For the last 40 years, this orthodoxy has been imposed with little evidence of what works and even less scrutiny of outcomes. The damage it has inflicted on our schools and children is there for all to see. Effective ways of teaching children to read have been replaced by a system which completely fails those who find reading most difficult. Didactic teaching has been replaced by 'child-centred' learning. Teachers, who were once proud to be considered as professionals, are now treated as operatives. Standards of discipline have collapsed. The curriculum has been destroyed. Competitive sports have been run down. An

acceptance of failure and a lack of aspiration is found in too many schools.

It is the most disadvantaged children who bear the consequences. The failure in our schools falls hardest on them. It condemns them to a life time of crime, drugs and prison and to seeing their own children also fail. It is largely responsible for the declining social mobility in this country.

It need not be like this. There are some excellent state schools which, despite the odds, manage to ignore the educational establishment and who consequently flourish. There are some extraordinary voluntary organisations who have filled the gaps in children's lives left by the failure of so many of our schools. And there is the example of the Charter Schools in the US where parents and local communities have been able to challenge a similar orthodoxy and to set up schools which are making remarkable progress in helping the urban poor.

We must challenge this deep-seated culture in our schools. Proposals for giving parents more freedom to set up schools, for imposing synthetic phonics, for enhancing the professionalism of teachers are all wise and greatly needed. But if change is to be lasting, something more dramatic is in order: namely, a recognition of the source of the crisis and an end to the educational ideology that has damaged schools and betrayed millions of children.



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