SUCCESS AGAINST THE ODDS

effective schools in disadvantaged areas

PAUL HAMLYN FOUNDATION

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EDUCATION

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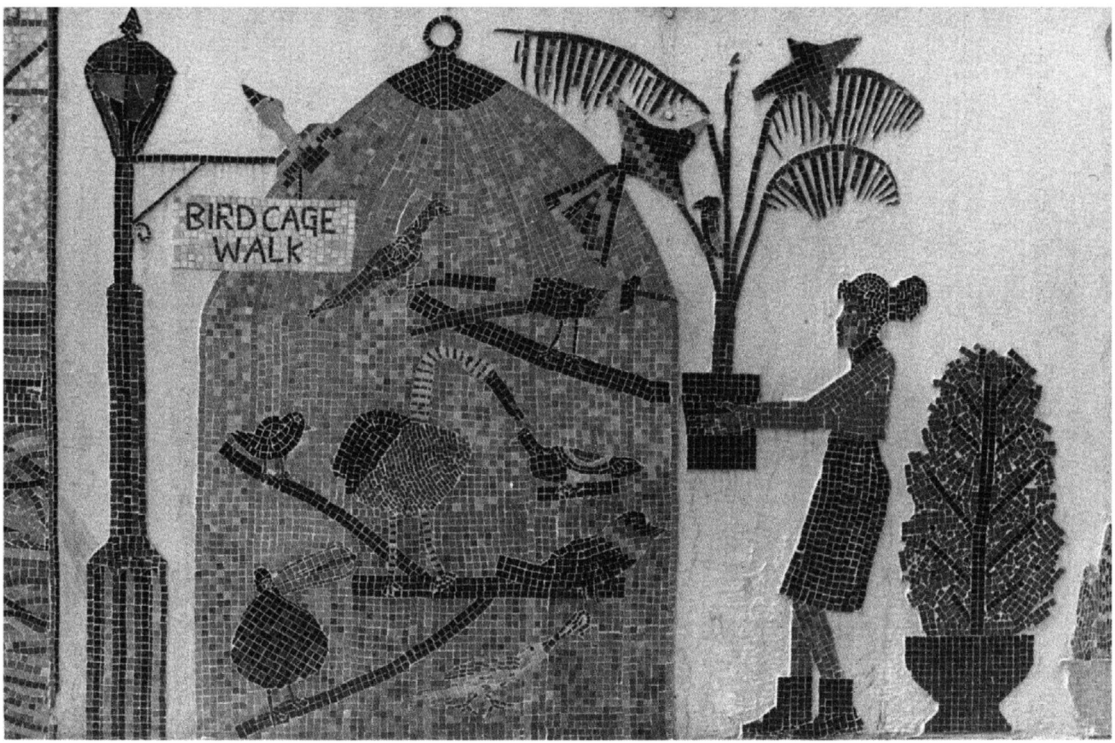
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Effective Schools in Disadvantaged Areas

National Commission on Education

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The work was overseen by a steering group led by a Commissioner, Margaret Maden, who, together with Josh Hillman of the Commission's staff, is responsible for the final chapter reflecting on the conclusions to be drawn from the case studies. The other members of the steering group were Professor Michael Barber, Professor Peter Mortimore, Barry Wakefield, Josh Hillman and myself.

We are immensely grateful to the thirty-seven members of the research teams whose work on the case studies provides the core of the book. The project would not have been possible without the willing cooperation of the staff, pupils, parents and governors of the eleven schools, to whom we wish continuing success.

Especial thanks are due to Josh Hillman, who managed the whole exercise and contributed substantially to the drafting and editing of the volume. During these latter stages, Phil Williams of the Commission's staff also played an indispensable part, in assembling statistics, in preparing the manuscript for publication, and in contributing his own incisive comments. Finally, the support of staff at Routledge, in particular Helen Fairlie and Cyril Poster, has been much appreciated.

Sir John Cassels
Director
National Commission on Education
June 1995

Note: Any terminology which readers might find unfamiliar in this book will probably be found in Appendix B.

The locations of the case study schools (numbers correspond to those given in the chapter headings)

INTRODUCTION
The challenge of disadvantage

Josh Hillman

The National Commission on Education has identified educational under-achievement in deprived areas, particularly in inner cities but also in rural locations, as an acute problem. In *Learning to Succeed* it was argued that where multiple disadvantages combine, 'the dice are loaded' against educational success.[1] Despite this, remarkable work is done by many of the schools that face the most difficult challenges. This book is about eleven schools which have succeeded against the odds.

SCHOOLS IN DISADVANTAGED AREAS

The gap in educational performance between schools in advantaged and those in disadvantaged areas is wide and increasing. GCSE results have been improving fairly rapidly overall, but a gap is opening up; schools in the LEAs forming the top quarter in terms of advantage are now achieving results over 50 per cent better than those in the bottom quarter.[2] The gap between individual LEAs is, of course, much greater. What is even more significant is the fact that these gaps are widening over time. Meanwhile, variations between schools are even more striking: a school where nearly all pupils get five good grades at GCSE is often only just down the road from another where only one in ten achieves this.

There is a similar picture in the primary sector. Large discrepancies exist between LEAs in the performance of their seven-year-olds in Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), but between a quarter and a half of the differences are associated with the proportion of households in social classes I and II.[3]

Examination and test results do not tell the whole story. OFSTED's survey of schools in disadvantaged urban areas found that across the system as a whole the residents of these areas are 'poorly served by the education system', and that 'pupils have only a slim chance of receiving sufficiently challenging and rewarding teaching throughout their educational career'.[4]

The clear message is that pupils in disadvantaged areas are less likely to do well at school.

DISADVANTAGE

What are 'the odds' faced by schools in different areas? The term 'disadvantage', defined as 'unfavourable conditions or circumstances, detriment or prejudice',[5] refers to social and material factors such as income, unemployment, housing, health and environmental conditions. In many senses, the term simply means 'poverty'. Profound social and economic changes have resulted in increasing disadvantage measured in a variety of ways:[6]

- after a slow and steady decrease between the war and 1977, inequality of income has risen rapidly;
- between 1979 and 1992, the poorest quarter of the population failed to benefit from economic growth, and the income of the poorest tenth after housing costs *fell* by between 9 and 17 per cent;
- between 1977 and 1991, the proportion of the population with incomes below half the national average rose from 6 to 20 per cent, with even higher figures for those with children;
- over a quarter of those in the poorest tenth of the population are children, a large proportion of whom are in the younger age groups.

It is clear from these facts that the scale of disadvantage is larger now than it was in 1977, particularly for children.

EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

Educational disadvantage means the denial of equal access to educational opportunities, the tendency to leave education at the first opportunity, and the hindrance of achievement by social and environmental factors.[7] Despite the fact that there is an increasingly standardised school system, through pupils' entitlement to the National Curriculum and a national system of 'quality assurance' of schools through OFSTED inspections, educational disadvantage is as much of an issue as ever. By the age of five, children are already very differently placed in terms of the extent to which they are able to benefit from primary education.

The negative relationship between material and social disadvantage and educational attainment is well established in empirical national and international research findings.[8] Socio-economic and family background factors have been shown to be important influences upon pupils' educational achievements at all stages of their school careers. These factors are strongly related to measures of prior attainment at entry to school.

How does material and social disadvantage translate into lower attainment? Disadvantage both limits access to educational opportunities and reduces the ability of children to benefit from the schooling that they do get. A number of contributory factors are included in the following list.

- Poverty, resulting from unemployment or low incomes, results in stress; and reduces or precludes money being spent by families on learning resources such as books, or learning opportunities such as outings and holidays.
- Poverty also increases the need for teenagers to be in paid employment: in evenings and at weekends, reducing time for homework; in some cases, during the day, causing absenteeism; and at the first opportunity of leaving the education system.
- Health problems are more likely, with their associated effects on physical and intellectual development.
- Housing problems are more likely: for example, overcrowding, bed-sharing, lack of a quiet space for homework, and a greater chance of household accidents.
- Children's environment is less likely to be conducive to their development: for example, greater pollution, limited access to gardens and other places to play.
- There is a greater prevalence of crime and drugs.
- Racism 'stifles learning because children are distracted by it and spend time trying to cope with it'.[9]
- Family disruption is more likely, with increased incidence of depression and neurotic disorder.
- Parents are more likely to have lower levels of education and parenting and educating skills; and less likely to have knowledge about and confidence in the education service.
- Children are less likely to have a secure mastery and understanding of language, to have enough opportunities to read at home, to have high self-esteem, or to be subject to peer-group pressure to succeed at school.

The frequent inter-relation of these various disadvantages has been termed 'multiple deprivation'. Not only do they accumulate, but they also reinforce one another, so that their collective impact is even greater than the sum of the individual effects.

Disadvantage tends to exhibit obstinate survival over time, and between generations. This was recognised in a notable speech in 1972 by Lord Joseph, then Secretary of State for Social Services, in which he drew attention to the 'cycle of deprivation'.[10] Research both before and since then has indeed found considerable evidence of persistence in many of the individual social disadvantages, but also, as Michael Rutter put it: 'many opportunities to break the chain'.[11]

It remains the case that the odds are stacked against schools in poorer areas. The link between disadvantage and educational performance has so far proved too difficult for policy-makers at a national level to break. However, many individual schools in disadvantaged areas have been able to do so, through having vision, providing a challenge to all pupils whatever their perceived capabilities, and by pursuing particular policies and practices. It is this

phenomenon that is described and analysed in these case studies of eleven schools 'succeeding against the odds'.

LOCATION OF DISADVANTAGE

In the view of the Policy Studies Institute: 'The decay at the heart of Britain's cities is one of the biggest challenges faced by its government'.[12] Combining factors available from 1991 census data to form indices of deprivation shows urban areas dominating the fifty worst-off districts in the country, in terms of both material deprivation and social deprivation.[13] For reasons already discussed, the performance of most schools in inner city districts is similarly unfavourable.[14] Although not on the scale of the United States, where schools are constantly blamed as a cause rather than a symptom of social and economic problems, the British media perennially run stories about crises in inner city schools.

Multiple disadvantage is not confined to the inner cities, but is also present in suburbs, outlying estates, smaller towns and rural areas.[15] Some of the circumstances are similar to those in inner cities: for example, declining or defunct industries, high unemployment and poor housing. In many rural areas there is a further form of deprivation which stems from the combination of a lack of a social infrastructure and the relative isolation of the communities. For example, rationalisation of services may lead to a village school, library or shop being closed down; if subsequently a local bus is withdrawn, those without access to private transport will suffer a further loss of opportunities.

POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Individual schools are more than ever in the public eye, and as their responsibilities have increased so have expectations of what they can achieve. Schools have been profoundly affected by a number of policy developments since 1988:

- delegation of funding and responsibilities have made them much more autonomous institutions;
- their funding depends mostly on the number of pupils they can attract;
- the support that they receive from local government has been eroded and in some cases dispensed with altogether;
- parents are encouraged to exercise their consumer power in the new education marketplace through choosing schools for their children;
- the main source of quantitative data on school performance for informing this choice are the league tables of examination results now published in newspapers.

These arrangements can easily discriminate against schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Government attempts to address the problem of disadvantaged schools have been piecemeal. Arrangements for the distribution of resources for education have favoured some disadvantaged areas through the 'Additional Educational Needs' element of the formula for allocation of block grants to local authorities. However, significant anomalies arise from this system, which in practice favour some boroughs which have relatively good educational performance, and work against others which have much poorer results. Similarly, large variations in the local management of schools (LMS) formulas for allocating resources from LEAs to schools mean that, in some authorities, chronically disadvantaged schools receive hardly any extra money.

The government has also had specific initiatives to target resources to schools in disadvantaged areas. Section 11 grants are available for schools with higher proportions of pupils from Commonwealth or ex-Commonwealth countries, to be used for additional teachers for English as a second language. This scheme is now being substantially reduced in scale. For a short period in the early 1990s, there was a small allocation for 'raising standards in inner city schools' under the Grant for Education and Support and Training (GEST) programme of direct grants to LEAs from the DfE, the sort of initiative described by Tim Brighouse as 'time limited dollops—the equivalent of food parcels to the third world'.[16]

There have also been a number of initiatives either at the local level, or in the form of pilot schemes, often highly effective but not followed up.[17] These include LEA drives to direct funds to schools with high numbers of disadvantaged pupils; Reading Recovery for early intervention and intensive help for children with literacy problems; parental involvement schemes; and compacts between employers, schools and pupils.

In general, the attention of policy-makers, the media and the general public is shifting towards the performance of individual schools. There is evidence in particular that the DFEE is seeking to understand the issues at stake and to examine how external support can help schools in the improvement process.[18]

MEASURING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

League tables of examination results do not tell us what the relative chances of success are for a particular pupil in each of the schools.[19] They tell us how the pupils that entered the schools five years ago fared. Intakes vary enormously, for example, in terms of the academic starting point of the pupils, and the educational background or material well-being of their parents. As has already been indicated, research shows that these advantages and disadvantages are powerful influences on academic achievement throughout a child's time at school, not least at the time when public examinations are sat.

However, taking account of these factors shows that there is plenty of scope for the individual school to make a difference. Schools with similar intakes do

not promote the progress of their pupils at the same rate, and indeed there are schools that give such a boost to their pupils as to defy all expectations of a more mechanistic or social determinist kind. In other words, some schools are more effective than others in 'adding value' to pupils' life chances.

SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

With the fact in mind that schools face different challenges, a large international body of research, with Britain, the United States and the Netherlands at the forefront, has examined the question of what makes a school effective.[20] In most studies, the definition of an effective school is on the lines of that given by Peter Mortimore: 'a school in which students progress further than might be expected from a consideration of its intake'.[21] From this work, a core of findings consistently emerges relating to school organisation and classroom practices which have a positive impact on pupils' progress;[22] and the findings are confirmed by teachers' own perceptions of effective management practice.[23] The important thing about these core characteristics and conditions is that they apply to those schools which are most effective in promoting progress, or those schools whose performance is continually improving over time, whether they be large or small, rural or urban, primary or secondary.

The findings of school effectiveness research do not provide an instant recipe to transform schools. They provide a 'vision of a more desirable place for schools to be but little insight as to how best to make the journey to that place'.[24] This is the central objective of 'school improvement', another international body of research with an associated approach to school development. School improvement is essentially about the strategies and underlying processes of change[25] by which a school can develop on a continuous basis. In the case of schools that face a range of problems, it is about those which recognise the need to improve, define success criteria, and move on to a long-term improvement path.

THE SUCCESS AGAINST THE ODDS PROJECT

As part of the follow-up to *Learning to Succeed,* the National Commission on Education embarked on a major new project on education in disadvantaged areas. It was felt that case studies in which the features, problems, strategies and initiatives of schools that are successful 'against the odds' are described and analysed could be a powerful mechanism for spreading good practice and thus helping others to lever up standards.[26]

The project involved eleven teams from around the United Kingdom, each undertaking to investigate a school which, on the basis of broadly comparable criteria, could be described as 'succeeding against the odds'. Each team included:

- a leading educationist, with knowledge about effective teaching and learning and expertise in school improvement;
- a person from the business world, able to offer fresh insight into the successful management of the school as an organisation and its interaction with the world of work;
- a person working towards the regeneration of disadvantaged areas, to give a perspective in which education is not seen in isolation but as a part of the life of a local community.

The schools were carefully selected by the research teams in close consultation with the National Commission. The selection was informed by academic outcomes adjusted for intake, inspection reports, and advice at the local level.

Collectively, the schools cover a broad spectrum. They include primary schools, with and without nursery classes; secondary schools, with and without sixth forms; and a special school. The locations comprise inner city, suburban, out-of-town estate, small township and rural areas. Type of governance includes local education authority maintained, voluntary and grant-maintained. The schools are scattered throughout all four countries of the United Kingdom (see the map on page xv). Two of the schools are girls' schools, the others are mixed. The pupils in two of the schools are almost exclusively Asian, whereas the catchment areas of other schools comprise predominantly white or ethnically mixed populations. One school is Roman Catholic, and another (in Belfast) 'integrates' Catholic and Protestant pupils. One school describes itself as a 'community school', sharing facilities with those in its neighbourhood. Despite all of these differences, what all the schools have in common is proven experience of overcoming difficult circumstances.

In each case, in-depth investigations of the life and work of the school took place, based on the guidelines which were provided by the Commission and are included as Appendix A. The programmes of each research team varied but generally included several visits to the school; interviews with senior managers, teachers, pupils, parents and governors, and in some cases members of the local community and LEA officers; observation of lessons, assemblies and extra-curricular activities; and examination of documents and statistics relating to the schools. Key facts and figures relating to the schools are included in the panels in each chapter.

The research teams were asked to make particular reference to the ten postulated features of success in *Learning to Succeed* which formed the basis for the proposals for raising achievement in schools. These are listed in the guidelines in Appendix A. They were also asked to examine all aspects of school policy including development planning, teaching methods, classroom organisation and the extent and nature of external support. The response of the school to various recent government reforms was to be probed; so also were issues of accountability arising in the school and how these are perceived by different people. Finally, the researchers were asked to analyse the process of

improvement in the school, including its precise objectives, who was involved in setting these, what initiatives were taken and what is needed to maintain and improve present achievements.

The teams have attempted to explain the success of their schools in the accounts which follow. As might have been expected, they vary greatly. Some are detailed accounts of the life and work of the school, drawing on the views of pupils, parents and teachers to show what lies behind the effectiveness of the school. Others are stories of schools that were 'turned round' from being failing schools to being schools on a long-term improvement path. All are celebrations of schools that are transforming the life chances of their pupils.

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South Bristol

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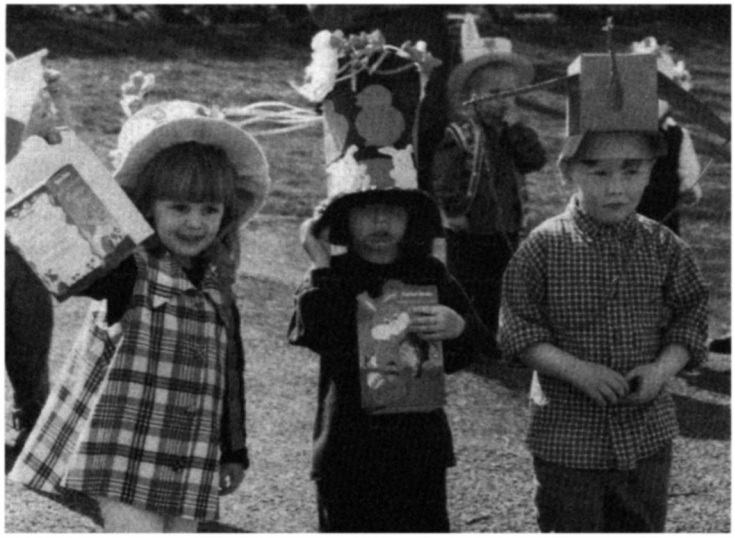
Fair Furlong is in an area of considerable social and material deprivation, with a high crime rate, a very high proportion of single parents and very little prospect of the development of any industry which might lower the high unemployment rate: all of this might well have a devastating effect on the ethos of any school. At this school a devoted staff, effective leadership and the development of sound policies have done much to counter these adverse conditions. The work of the children, both academic and creative, generates an enthusiasm which communicates itself to parents and the wider community.

This is a study of a primary school in Bristol, a school which has a vibrant, exciting atmosphere, where pupils and teachers work hard and effectively. A school described by governors, parents and teachers as 'marvellous', 'absolutely brilliant', 'exciting', 'inviting' and about which the chair of governors said 'it's all buzzing in the school now'. The classrooms and corridors are filled with displays of children's work, there is a school choir which has sung in Bristol Cathedral, children study the violin, participate in workshops with artists in residence, enter and win competitions, put on excellent, high-standard performances for their parents at Christmas, look after an area of woodland as part of an environmental project, enjoy and experience success with their academic work and above all are valued as individuals. The school prospectus states:

> 'We try to be a caring school where every child will feel secure, happy and valued and where purposeful learning can take place. We want the children to be happy at school and we want learning at school to be a positive experience…we aim at happy and hardworking children who are proud of their achievements.'

In the opinion of the research team, these aims are being achieved. Teachers in schools like this can be justifiably proud of their work, but the achievements here are greater, since this is a school that can accurately be described as one which is succeeding against the odds.



THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The data that follow are drawn from 1994 statistics supplied by Bristol City Council and from the bid for government funding by the Bristol City Challenge Steering Group (1992). The school is situated in one of the areas with the highest incidence of poverty in Bristol. Using six indicators—unemployment; free school meals; community charge rebates; children in households with no earners/ in households with one lone parent working part-time; long-term illness; mortality rates for those under sixty-five—it is in the quintile of city areas with the highest incidence of poverty. The social characteristics of the area have been summarised as 'very high proportion of lone parents; clear evidence of poor health and premature death; poor community facilities; low educational expectations of young children; unemployment fifty per cent higher than the local average; long term unemployment worst in the city and remoteness from the areas of growth'. It is located about 5 miles from the centre of Bristol, a predominantly white area (98 per cent), in the middle of an outer city housing estate. The estate was built in the 1950s and 1960s with a mixture of semi-detached and terraced housing and flats, many of which are now beginning to deteriorate. About 45 per cent of the housing is owner-occupied; the remainder, owned by the local authority, is the more unpopular or poorer-quality accommodation—for example, high-rise flats. Unemployment in the area is 17. 58 per cent; full-time employment is approximately 56 per cent and part-time 18. 17 per cent (1991 figures). One of the key problems for the people who live here is that there have been few, if any, local employers since a major factory closed in 1992. The area is remote from the city's growth areas and road access to the city centre and the motorways are poor. This is judged to be one of the main

reasons for the lack of private investment and commercial growth. Those people who have work have to travel into the city centre, many of them relying on expensive public transport, since 44.5 per cent of the households do not have cars. 'For a large number of the population, Bristol was regarded as being somewhere else: travelling to the city centre was seen as going into Bristol—a sign of the isolation felt in this area.'

A significant proportion of the families are headed by a single parent, often a young mother: a study completed by a local health centre in 1989 said that, in 70 per cent of families, one or both parents were under twenty-one at the birth of the first child. These families are frequently living in high-rise flats which are unsuitable for bringing up children. An estimated 50 per cent of families in the school catchment area are welfare-dependent. Money for housing, heating and food is in short supply and this can have a detrimental effect on physical health. Central heating in the homes is often absent altogether or too expensive to run, and washing and drying clothes can be a major problem, especially due to the dearth of local laundrettes. Shopping facilities are poor; the child-care facilities are inadequate given the potential demand and leisure provision is under-developed. A 1992 study concluded that about 30 per cent of young people in the area, mainly male, were drug users. Crime and fear of crime are major concerns in the locality.

How do these factors affect the families in the area and what impact do they have on the school? A local priest who ran a community project said that in his view the main problem was 'the lack of ambition, lack of self-worth' experienced by many people:

> 'There is a lot of hurt, pain, damage and it is very visible— children grow up trying to survive. There is no real feeling of security for the children; they are emotionally deprived. They experience verbal aggression/verbal assault; there is a lot of harshness verbally and physically in human relationships—it is hard to achieve some sense of stability and self-worth. For many children the school is the only area where there is consistency in adult relationships; they experience a sense of belonging and a sense of direction for the first time.'

A further problem that he identified was the lack of positive male role models; women are frequently the central figures in the community and there are many single-parent families headed by women:

> 'Men are often unemployed, at a loose end, not doing much for the community. Community activities are dominated by women. Men are seen in pubs, those who are working are outside the area, there are no jobs in the area to keep men here.'

Although these comments paint a bleak picture, it would be wrong to give the impression that every family is subject to these pressures. Certainly it would be wrong to imply that large numbers of children are neglected by their families. Though they recognise the problems in the community, the school teachers spoke very positively about the support that they received from the parents. One teacher commented:

> 'Historically the area has had a bad name. This is sad because we have some lovely families. They may have poor parenting skills but a lot of love.'
>
> (Deputy head)

Some of the factors mentioned by the teachers could be found in any area: for example, children spending time on their own because of a parent s unsocial working hours; children staying up late and watching TV and consequently being very tired next day at school. Many children learned to become independent at a very young age:

> 'A lot of children are on their own, parents don't have much time to give them. There isn't much to do after school and facilities in school are very much appreciated by the children.'
>
> (Class teacher)

> 'Some of my class (7 and 8 year olds) come to school on their own, go off to the shops, a lot are quite influenced, negatively, by an older sibling—it's difficult to get the pitch right.'
>
> (Class teacher)

One of the teachers echoed the community worker by identifying the problem of limited aspirations as a key issue:

> 'It's an estate, the boundaries are very limited. Families follow the same limited pattern and the aspirations of parents and children are low. I feel it's very important to try and widen their horizons and try and break the pattern.'

It seems that it is not uncommon for those involved in youth training schemes to find sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds who have never left the estate.

A major problem identified by teachers was that children entering the school could be as much as two years behind their peers in a middle-class area in terms of their experiences and skills; language skills were often poor, they might have lacked play experiences, some 'are not even toilet trained'. However, the key issue for the school, in the opinion of teachers, school governors and community workers was that the children's behaviour was difficult to manage. The community worker said that discipline was a major challenge for the teachers:

> 'We are dealing with children who outside the school are accus tomed to clouts. Children expect a certain physical reaction to behaviour, there is a lack of conversation between parents and children. There is the difficulty of applying a new set of rules to children who were used to a different set of rules. Teachers have to apply a good deal more of their own personal influence—establish a rapport with kids who don't understand what is going on.'

He felt that poor communication skills led to problems: 'communication is a difficult area—they are used to swearing, no other way of expressing feelings'. He felt that some parents were themselves unable to manage their children's behaviour:

> 'Parents are unable to cope with their children's behaviour—so they collude with the child's behaviour and don't back up the school. A number are frightened of their kids and have no control of them—parents are trying to survive against their kids and vice versa.'

WHAT IS THE SCHOOL LIKE?

The school is a large, mixed primary school, taking children from ages three to eleven. In September 1994 there were 382 pupils on roll including a forty-five-place nursery class. The nursery operates in two sessions and these children do not stay for lunch; 166 (49 per cent) of the children in the infant and junior classes are registered for free school meals. All the children are white and none of them has English as a second language. The average class size is twenty-seven. In the 1994 autumn term four pupils had statements of special educational needs though this number has since increased. There are twenty-two full-time and part-time teachers (16.2 full-time equivalents (fte)).

The school is predominantly a female environment. The headteacher is a woman and there is only one male teacher; the caretaker and cleaners are all women. This gender balance is not the result of any deliberate policy; on the contrary, the headteacher said that she would like to have some more male teachers on the staff. However, the headteacher and the governors had developed a rigorous selection and appointment process and she said that the quality of male teachers who had come forward for interviews had been disappointing.

A visit to the school is a lively, stimulating and enjoyable experience. Children and their teachers appear busy and happy and there is a creative 'buzz' in the place; the classrooms are well resourced and organised, brightly painted and contain excellent displays of children's work. Noticeable also is the extensive security. The main school door is kept locked and there is an entry phone system for visitors. Despite having a noisy alarm system, the building has been broken into on several occasions and video recorders and other items of equipment have been stolen. Security is made especially difficult by the fact that there is an open