

A Study of Underachievement in a Middle School;

identification, measurement, perspectives and change .

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of underachievement in a middle school in Bedfordshire. It begins by focusing on the concerns expressed by teachers about the apparent mismatch between children's abilities, as expressed by intelligence tests and actual achievement as measured by reading tests. Consideration is also given to those influences which teachers articulate as modifying factors in school and teacher performance.

The Literature Review gives a broad view of the work in a field and enables a working definition to be developed and a general coding frame organised in order to facilitate comparison between the research initiatives. It also looks at the historical methods of identifying underachievement and reviews the issues most relevant to the study.

The fieldwork method employs two approaches. The first is based on the analysis of school records over a period of eleven years and develops an operational definition of underachievement based on the statistical comparison of test scores. It also examines the correlation between behaviour and underachievement. The second approach is the implementation of a programme of action research in order to develop a better understanding of underachievement within the school by sampling the perspectives of teachers, pupils and parents; and to engage these groups in a process of change.

As an illustration of some of the variables influencing children's achievement, four case studies were prepared. These are a random selection of underachieving children taken from the school records and use other professional sources. They describe the children's level of performance, their behaviour patterns and the action taken by the school to

influence positive change. A further piece of fieldwork was undertaken in order to sample the experiences of the parents of these four children. This consisted of two hour long interviews within the home for each of the four sets of parents. Field notes were taken for later analysis.

Children's perspectives were sampled by implementing a classroom drama project involving teachers and children in order to raise awareness of underachievement and to explore, through role play, the factors which influence underachievement. A survey was conducted amongst the children at the end of the project.

In order to look at teachers' perspectives a number of approaches were used. By asking existing subject and pastoral groupings to discuss and explore aspects of underachievement I was able to use the minutes of the meetings. Through related in-service courses I was able to use the staff minutes when participants reported back to full staff meetings. Two further surveys were conducted during the research.

The research finds that the causes of underachievement are directly related to the stress levels under which the child is functioning. These stressors may be psychological, social, medical or educational but crucially it is more likely to be a complex interaction of many factors. These feed the deteriorating functioning of the child and almost always leads to abnormal behaviours. These may manifest themselves in aggressive or withdrawn relationships which are generally gender specific. The ability to function positively under high levels of stress seems to be related to individual personality and the ability to relieve stress by developing therapeutic social activities or relationships.

The teacher, the way in which the school is organised and the positive communication between the school and parents can do much to minimise the isolation of the underachieving child. Positive and encouraging intervention in the downward spiral of the child's functioning has been seen to be successful. This activity can do much to raise the achievement of schools in an unthreatening and positive way in which the teachers feel in control and that their concerns are heard and valued.

The process of research is important in that the methodology involves all the parties involved in the research. This leads to the general raising of awareness of the issues and of critical discussion of the organisation and teaching approaches within the school. This methodology can be applied to any workplace-based research. It has the advantage of encouraging the participants to develop an 'ownership' in the research and because of the related training opportunities, they can also see personal rewards in taking part in the research. Individuals may also feel encouraged to develop their own interests and seen accreditation for post-graduate qualifications at their local university. This methodological approach I have called. 'Animated Research'. This is because of the way in which all participants have equal status in the research and there is a lively and animated interaction between the groups, between qualitative and quantitative approaches and between the various methodological approaches used in data gathering.

The final chapter draws together the research findings in the form of a summary, discusses the implications of the findings and reaches conclusions with regard to the relationship between underachievement and the school. There is also a critical evaluation of the research project.

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Chapter 1

BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY

This study is about one Middle School in Bedfordshire experiencing falling rolls, diminishing human and material resources and an apparent increasing level of underachievement. The aim was to develop a better understanding of underachievement by looking at the children's records; listening to the views of children, teachers and parents; and to work with school staff to address the problem.

My role as deputy head included responsibility for staff in-service training, pastoral care of staff and pupils, external liaison, children's records, testing and assessment and implementation of the National Curriculum. I was also a member of the Campus Curriculum Panel considering the implications of impending amalgamation. In addition to this major role, I was also Head of English with responsibility for Special Needs, English as a Second Language, Cross-Curricular Initiatives and Drama. As a school governor I was responsible for governor training concerning the implications of the Local Management of Schools.

In September 1993 I was appointed as Senior Lecturer in Primary Education at De Montfort University Bedford, but was asked by the governors of the Middle School to complete the study.

The following sections are intended to set the research in context and to illuminate the school policy and those modifying variables which seemed to be interfering with its implementation. It will also articulate the empirical evidence which gave rise to this study.

A Middle School : Promise, Plans and Problems

The Bedfordshire plans for educational reorganisation were implemented in 1971 with the opening of its first purpose built middle school. The school was designed to accommodate 600 pupils of both sexes in the 9-13 age range. The school never achieved its full capacity and had experienced diminishing rolls over the past ten years until its 1989 population of 290 pupils. The projected population trends suggested that the decline had stabilised and that an upward trend could be expected in the late 1990's. During the course of the study the school varied from three to four form entry (12-14 classes) and 14-16 teachers including the Headmaster. The class sizes varied from 22 to 36.

The school was one of a pair built to the same basic design and was sited on a large campus which accommodated another middle school (built later of modified design) and an upper school. Eventually the three schools were expected to provide education for some 2200 pupils in the age range 9-18. The total enrolment of the three schools was about half of this. The design for the school was evolved after consultation between teachers, advisers, officers and architects, and attempted to take account of the basic educational and social needs of children in their middle years of schooling. The school was spacious and well-resourced and a single storey structure apart from the Art Centre, which had two floors.

The area is largely council housing and was built principally to serve the London over-spill programme of the 1960's. The social and language abilities of the children were consequently more in keeping with those associated with an inner-city area rather than with a rural community.

The middle school drew predominantly from four primary schools and most children later transferred to the adjacent upper school. A number of local primary children went to middle

schools elsewhere, and a small but increasing proportion of children from the campus middle schools opted to transfer to upper schools in the neighbouring town. (Figure 1.1)

Since 1979 I had been engaged as part of a professional task in developing a computer data base on which to record children's educational, social and medical histories. By 1986 this task was complete and all records had been transferred from 'hard' files to disc. This enabled large amounts of information to be analysed for the first time and it was from this source that I noticed an apparent anomaly in test scores which seemed to confirm the empirical comments made by teachers that an unusually high proportion of children within the school seemed to be underachieving, and suggested that a more rigorous and systematic analysis of children's records may reveal the form which this underachievement was taking and some of the factors which influenced underachievement.

Taken alone the test scores were accepted as worrying by teachers and senior staff, but not critical. Doubt was expressed about the logic of comparing children from a depressed social and linguistic background with a 'normal' population - the test results would simply tend to confirm the disparity. Teachers articulated that children from a 'deprived' social and linguistic background would tend to achieve depressed test results. Further, teachers perceived that cultural bias in tests and the tendency for tests to be middle class orientated, could be factors in the possible underestimation of the capabilities of working class and minority group children. Teachers also expressed concern about the possibility of allowing test results to influence their expectation and to encourage a general underestimation of children's abilities within the school.

The tests were at best seen only as error laden approximations of true scores and the intelligence tests, though slightly depressed, were within the 'normal' banding as expressed by the tests'

reliability. Nevertheless, this information demonstrated the need to discover more about the nature and extent of underachievement as manifest within the school, in order to try and modify it.

In September 1989 I was asked to analyse the test results of the local 9+ population for presentation to the area Special Needs Panel. There seemed to be a significant difference between the children's potential (as measured on an I.Q. test) and actual performance (as measured on a range of achievement tests) which was not evident in the total 9+ population. Whilst recognising the problems of comparing uncorrelated test results, there was mounting evidence to suggest that the school intake contained an unusually high proportion of underachievers when compared to the total local population.

An examination of the numbers of children entering the school at 9+ revealed a considerable shortfall in the 9+ population caused by children allocated places but not taking them up. In 1979 this loss was about 20% of the total intake but rose to 36% by 1988. This trend also coincided with a steady population fall of the 9+ intake such that the school roll fell from 500+ in 1979 to 292 in 1988. Further, throughout this period there was a transient movement each year of 13% of children entering or leaving the school between the ages of 9-13. In practical terms this meant a loss of five classes over the period examined and movement of one class to other schools during the middle school years.

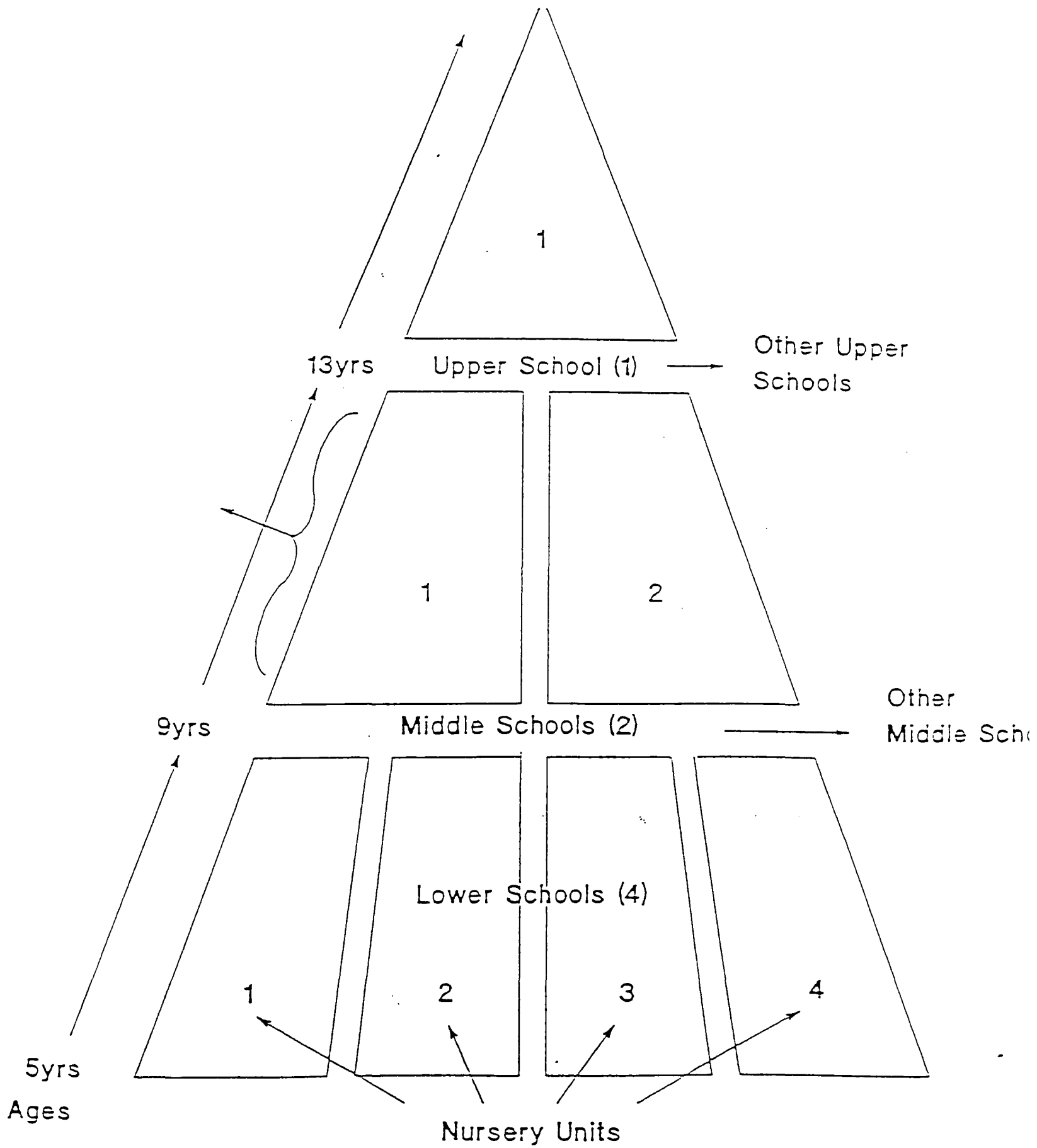
The fall in school population was erratic year by year and caused a number of organisational anomalies. In the school year 1986-87 for instance, the school population consisted of 233 boys and 174 girls unevenly distributed over the four middle school years. This resulted in two classes being constituted of a 2 : 1 ratio of boys to girls and all classes having more boys than girls.

Further, the class sizes varied from 22 to 36 children. This had implications for resourcing and organising mixed ability classes with a variety of special needs, second language and behavioural needs.

The transient school population (those children who entered or left the school during the middle school years) represented 37 children in 1987-88. The majority of the children (thirty-one) had suffered serious school or behavioural problems and nine stayed at the school for less than one term before moving on, which contributed to general instability. In five cases, the children had been suspended from other schools for serious behavioural disorders. The six children who had entered the school at 9+ but left during the middle school years did so predominantly because their fathers found work out of the area. Five of these were average to above average students.

The consequence of this movement was a gradual accumulation of children with educational, social and behavioural problems which constituted an increasing percentage of the school population as the total intake fell. This was exacerbated by the gradual loss of more able children during the middle school years.

Fig 1.1 Middle School Population



The school also attracted local initiatives for special educational needs:

1. a second language unit
(three Vietnamese children)
2. a 'travellers' unit
(five children)
3. religious exclusive children
(five children for whom special curriculum provision had to be made)

It is ironic that the positive attempts made by the staff to improve curriculum access to deprived children seem to have been factors in devaluing the school in the eyes of the parents of able children. Further, the success at dealing with 'difficult' children tended to attract more of these children from other school and deter the more able.

By analysing the distribution of intelligence and attainment of the school intake it was also possible to compare the school intake with the total 9+ local population. This was to ascertain whether the school represented a reflection of general local intelligence and attainment and how this compared with the national norms. The tests used were the 7+ screening tests and the 9+ tests of the period 1979-1987 involving a total of 3326 children.

The average over this period for the intelligence tests displayed similar levels between the school, local and national norms. There were no significant differences and the results were within the acceptable norms as defined by the tests' reliability. However, it was noticeable that the local population was consistently below the national norms and the school was further below the results obtained for the total local 9+ population. These differences, though small, were significant enough for comment and further examination as this may reveal differences in the distribution of scores.

The local 9+ population had markedly fewer children achieving quotients in excess of 116 when compared to national norms and the majority of the children were clustered around the average. Having taken into account the stability of the results by demonstrating the constancy at 7+ and 9+ I was led to concede that the depression of the local distribution of scores may be related to social and cultural variables.

‘There is abundant evidence that intelligence test performance is influenced by general cultural background Studies repeatedly show lower test performance for children from lower socio-economic groups’ (Thorndike and Hagen, 1969)

**Table 1.2 Results of 7+ Screening done in Autumn 1984
(Relates to 9+ School Intake 1986-87)**

Quotients	Total Age Group	Went elsewhere	Research School	Sister School	Normal Distribution
116 and above	8.4%	16.5%	5.0%	6.5%	16
101 - 115	40.0%	49.0%	40.0%	33.0%	34
86 - 100	37.0%	21.0%	39.0%	49.0%	34
85 and below	14.0%	13.5%	16.0%	11.5%	16
Totals (numbers)	224	61	83	80	

SPAR Reading Test

Quotients	Total Age Group	Went elsewhere	Research School	Sister School	Normal Distribution
116 and above	12.0%	23.0%	8.0%	9.5%	16
101 - 115	34.0%	41.0%	29.0%	32.5%	34
86 - 100	38.0%	25.0%	40.0%	47.0%	34
85 and below	15.0%	11.0%	23.0%	11.0%	16
Totals (numbers)					

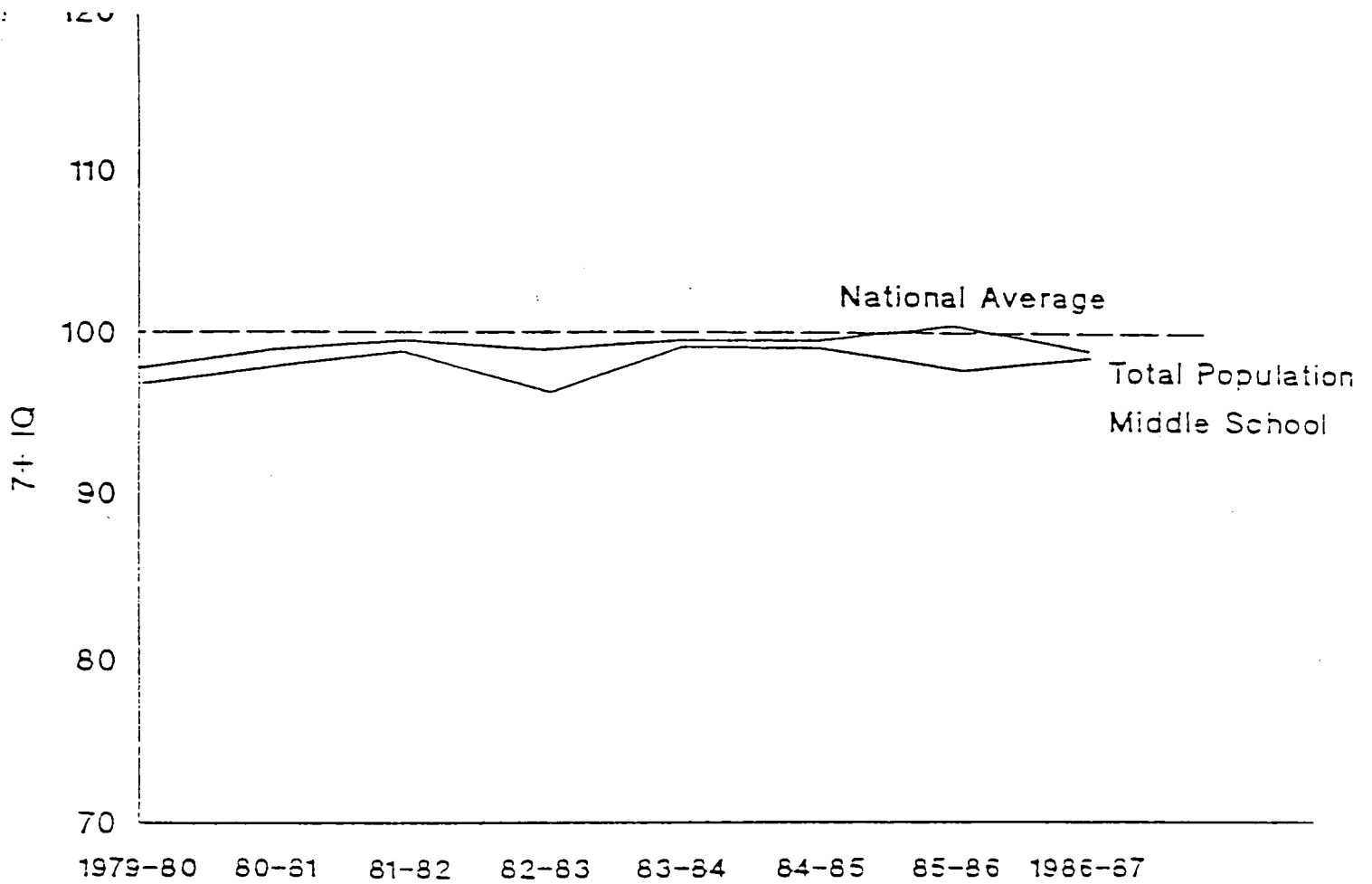
SPAR Spelling Test

Quotients	Total Age Group	Went elsewhere	Research School	Sister School	Normal Distribution
116 and above	15.0%	30.0%	6.0%	13.0%	16
101 - 115	31.0%	33.0%	31.0%	30.0%	34
86 - 100	33.0%	26.0%	34.0%	37.0%	34
85 and below	20.0%	11.0%	29.0%	20.0%	16
Totals (numbers)					

The school intake was even more anomalous. 79% of the children were clustered around the average with only 5% above 116 and 16% below 85.

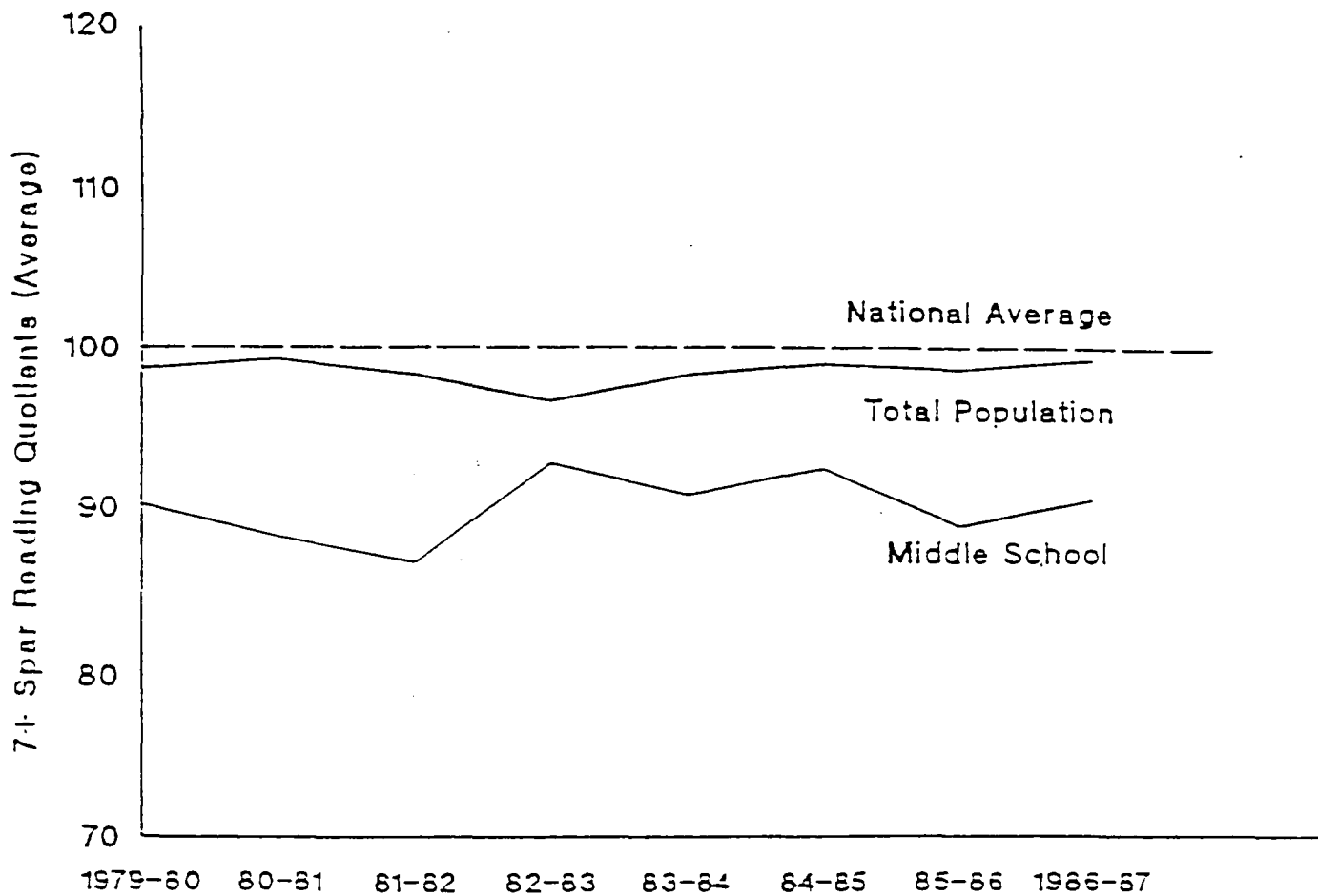
The reading test results over the same period came as something of a surprise. The empirical observation of teachers had recognised for some time that the 9+ intake were achieving at a much lower level than might reasonably be expected in relation to their tested intelligence. It was considered that this was a phenomenon of the total local 9+ population and that it was related to socio-economic deprivation. This was not so. The averages of the school 9+ intake over the whole period were consistently one standard deviation below those of the total local population. Further, an examination of the distribution of scores revealed that high achievers were 4% lower in the school and the low achievers 8% higher than in the local population. This meant that few classes had an even distribution of intelligence and achievement and most classes had large numbers of children with reading difficulties. The result of this had implications for resources and teacher expectation.

Fig 1.3 I.Q. Tests at 7+ 1979 - 1987



School Year	Middle School Intake	Total Population
1979-80	97.1	97.9
1980-81	98.8	99.0
1981-82	99.0	99.6
1982-83	97.4	98.7
1983-84	99.4	99.5
1984-85	98.9	99.4
1985-86	98.0	100.2
1986-87	98.5	98.9

(Figure 1.4) Reading Achievement: evidence of 'creaming' 1979 - 1987



Year (Total School Intake)

Spar 7+ Reading Quotients

School Year	Middle School Average (9+)	Total Local Population 9+
1979-80	90.16	98.80
1980-81	89.03	99.12
1981-82	87.81	98.41
1982-83	93.14	97.38
1983-84	91.30	98.30
1984-85	92.68	98.75
1985-86	89.08	98.62
1986-87	91.35	99.26

(Table 1.5) (Intake) 9+ Reading Test Scores 1983-86

	(number of children)							
	1983		1984		1985		1986	
70	4		5		5		5	
71 - 80	12		19		7		12	
81 - 90	30		38		20		33	
91 - 100	34	80	25	87	26	58	29	79
<hr/>								
								National
								Average
101 - 110	11		9		20		18	
111 - 120	2		3		7		5	
120+	9	13	1	13	4	31	1	24

The graph of distribution is negatively skewed.

Year (Total School Intake)

SPAR 9+ Reading Quotients

School Year	Middle School Average (9+)	Total Population 9+
1979-80	90.16	98.9
1980-81	89.03	99.12
1981-82	87.84	98.41
1982-83	93.14	97.38
1983-84	91.30	98.30
1984-85	92.68	98.75
1985-86	89.08	98.62
1986-87	91.35	99.26

This confirmed the observations of teachers and coincided with the findings of the school policy review committee, of which I was a member. As part of the annual school review (1988-89) the senior management team was assessing the effectiveness of management, administrative and professional strategies operating within the school. It was concerned with identification and development of good educational practice and the analysis of those factors which hindered or interfered with the successful implementation of strategies to raise school achievement.

The review illustrated earlier evidence marking a discrepancy between the aims of school achievement as articulated by the management team and by the teachers charged with reaching those goals. Whilst there was broad agreement and involvement by all teachers in the

development of the school's philosophy of good educational practice, practical difficulties at the classroom level led to constant compromises which had the effect of diminishing the school's effectiveness. It occurred to me that a measure of the school's achievement could be defined by examining the shortfall between intended goals and actual achievement, by examining the data already collected concerning the views and experiences of management and teachers, in order to compare their opinions.

This encouraged me to look more deeply into the data which sampled a variety of views concerning children's underachievement - parents, children and teachers - to discover if there were differences in emphasis and attitude towards those factors perceived as important in influencing achievement. The central idea was that parents, children and teachers may have different but equally legitimate perspectives on underachievement, which may be illuminating when compared and reveal some of the processes which were at work.

A review of other research may reveal what is known about the correlates and causes of underachievement, but in order to affect change it may be necessary to proceed from the views of those concerned. The kinds of causes discussed in much of the literature are not very helpful in devising action to tackle underachievement. What people believe about underachievement is important as such beliefs (attitudes, perceptions) have consequences for underachievement and tackling underachievement as they are themselves part of the cause and effect chain, though different from the sort of factors identified in the literature search. With social influences on educational underachievement you often cannot do much about the 'underlying causes', but you can still sometimes ameliorate their effects. A literature review may however be helpful in clarifying a working definition of underachievement which could be applied to the school.

The school review also illustrated the rising levels of stress that teachers felt they were enduring and the diminishing material and human resources evident as the result of falling rolls. It was therefore crucial that the continuing research was perceived as being of practical value to teachers and did not represent yet another external imposition on their time and energy. By developing the programme of research I wished to encourage collaborative teaching strategies and to use the existing management, administrative and professional processes in the identification and dissemination of the causes of underachievement. In this way in-service training could also be allied to improving teacher's skills in response to school need.

This approach had a number of advantages to commend it. The teacher's awareness was focused on underachievement within the classroom, the factors which influenced it and the methods by which modification might be achieved. The 'team' approach encouraged effective communication and the development and sharing of resources. Further, it prevented the isolation of the research and urged the participants to develop a personal ownership in the research. The immediacy of dissemination was maintained through the examination of minutes of meetings and teachers notes and necessary training was achieved through the modification of in-service arrangements already in situ.

The use of existing administrative processes could also be adapted to sample the attitudes and opinions of both parents and children and in this was circumvented the possibility of introducing factors which might create anxiety and thus contaminate the research. It could also strengthen relationships and improve communication.

This approach required a clear process model involving a prepared set of procedures for involving teachers. (Figure 1.5)

(Figure 1.6) A Process Model

Establish a positive learning Environment

Re-diagnosing need
as appropriate

Creating collaborative
planning mechanisms

Creating activities
with suitable
techniques and
materials then
evaluating outcome

Diagnosing the need
for the research

Designing a pattern of
learning experiences
(which may include group activities, INSET,
informational input and informal meetings)

Ethical Issues

I was particularly concerned about the legal and moral issues concerned with the use of children's records and of information from external sources, which might be considered to be confidential. In some cases the issues were quite clear - medical records and minutes of case conferences were strictly confidential, for instance. In others the situation was not so clear. In consultation with the headmaster and governors an undertaking was made to avoid the possibility of individual children being identified. To this end all personal details were removed from the records that were used. Where specific case studies were involved permission was obtained from parents before they were quoted and, again, personal details were omitted to prevent identification. Where data was of a general nature and not specific to an individual child there was no difficulty but a problem arose where information was supplied to the school by outside sources for use in developing teaching strategies to help individual children.

The information in this case was a response to a particular problem and tendered for a specific purpose and might not have been intended for public security. Under this heading were reports from an educational psychologist and information from parents even though the children and families could not be identified I was morally bound to seek permission from the source, from the parent and finally from the headmaster and governors. The only real problem came when I wished to investigate and profile individual children - when care had to be taken to ensure the anonymity of children and families. In spite of the care taken to ensure privacy they might still be identified by friends, neighbours and other children who might know some of the details used and it was therefore crucial to work closely with parents and respect their wishes in the method of dissemination. The data was also coded to prevent unauthorised access.

The annual school review also involved an examination of the school organisation and philosophy. This sets the research into its context and enables the reader to understand the philosophy which the middle school represented and the constraints which impeded its implementation.

Policy and Curriculum

The school brochure stated (1986):

‘The middle school should exist and develop not simply as a combination of top primary and lower secondary attitudes, but as a phase with its own ethos and philosophy. The emphasis is on attitudes to learning with encouragement being given to pupils to listen and talk about ideas, facts and relationships. This can only be accomplished by experiencing a variety of subject areas and using materials which are both stimulating and demanding and related to the child’s interests and abilities. Developing positive work and study skills is given a high priority and emphasis is placed on co-operative learning rather than on competition. Respect for the feelings, opinions and work of others is to be the constant guide to behaviour’.

The curriculum becomes increasingly subject-based as the child progresses through the school as is illustrated by the following review.

First Year

Year one continued the style of learning experienced by the children in the lower school in that they had their own teacher with whom they could identify for most of the time. However, more responsibility was given to the pupils and a greater degree of involvement in the organisation of their own experiences encouraged through the integrated day. Specialist language staff and other specialists were involved for small amounts of time.

There were three mixed ability classes. Pupils were allocated to classes on the basis of their standardised test scores in the lower school, by consultation with lower school teachers and by

family associations to one of the four houses. The test scores were used to attempt to balance the intellectual range of each class. In the summer term of each school year each of the first year teachers visited the feeder lower school. They talked to the children and staff about the school and the work. Problems were discussed with staff and remedial programmes developed for individual children. Language and behavioural problems were identified and teaching strategies discussed with the Deputy Head (Pastoral). In the last week of the school year the lower school children were brought by their teachers to the middle school, allocated to classes, introduced to their new teachers and shown around the school.

Tutors taught their own classes for approximately 75% of the week with specialist teachers taking Music, Physical Education and Swimming. There was a constant emphasis on the teaching of reading. The Ginn 360 scheme was in operation and was used in conjunction with the centre and school libraries. There were three parent evenings during the year and four parents helped with reading and computer studies. Language staff and other specialists were involved for small amounts of time.

Second Year

The classes were organised into three mixed ability groups and were based in a centre consisting of three open-plan classrooms and one self-contained unit.

The children had specialist teachers for Science, French, Music, Design and Physical Education. This left them less contact time with their form tutors but where possible the specialist was a member of the year team and was timetabled to teach all classes in that year. Team teaching was introduced in Drama, Science and Humanities to maximise the efficiency of specialist teaching,

encourage staff development, introduce a 'critical friend', minimise discipline problems and to enable remedial teaching to occur in small groups.

Third Year

The third year consisted of three classes with enough space for four if required. Three classrooms were open plan, the fourth was self-contained and used for 70% of the time as a specialist language teaching area. Classes still spent much of their time with their form teacher. The child had specialist teaching for Science, French, Design, Physical Education and Games and were set into four ability groups for Mathematics. Apart from children requiring special attention in reading, the classes no longer followed the Ginn Reading Scheme, but as independent readers encouraged to use the library service. Children kept a personal record and were encouraged to write reviews of the books they read. There was more emphasis on group projects and of extended research, encouraging socialisation and the discovery of the value of careful note taking, positive study skills and the importance of presentation. In February the parents of each child were invited to the school to attend a personal interview with their child's form teacher and to see the headteacher if required. This was followed by a written report at the end of the year when the parents were again able to see the form tutor to discuss the child's attitude and progress. Parents helped with reading, in the design centre, with swimming and on educational trips.

Fourth Year

The fourth year were in three mixed ability classes. The form teacher registered the class and taught at least three subjects, was responsible for the pupil's personal progress, dealt with pastoral matters and consulted with Head of Year and Senior Staff to co-ordinate the child's development. There was a formal content to most of the academic work and pupils undertook

duties to help organise and develop social events and school clubs. There was more subject specialism as pupils were prepared for the ethos of the upper school. Science and Technology were taught by specialist staff, boys and girls were taught separately for Physical Education, and Maths was set over the whole year. Special Needs requirements were supported by specialist staff within the normal classroom setting. At the end of the summer term the children spent a day at the upper school visiting their new teachers and familiarising themselves with the demands of change. There was regular liaison between the middle and upper schools both socially and academically and all children had access to an extensive list of extra-curricular activities, as did the children in other years).

The Extended Curriculum

The school provided a rich variety of opportunities in sport, leisure and educational activities which a large number of children took advantage of and which most of the staff were engaged in organising. This demonstrated a commitment and involvement in the extended curriculum. However, the school's policy of subsidising poor children in a variety of ways

1. Paying for school trips
2. Providing musical instruments
3. Providing sports kit

could not be maintained as a result of economic circumstances in the late 80's and the change in the law which required all children to be provided, free of charge, any educational experience which could legitimately be said to be directly related to the curriculum.

Table 1.7**The Extended Curriculum**

“The school should provide experiences for leisure, educational and sporting activities”
(School Policy Document, 1992)

Sport	Music	Visits and Trips
Swimming Rugby Football Basketball Athletics Cross Country Netball Gymnastics Rounders Cricket Tennis	Brass Tuition Woodwind Tuition Strings Tuition Orchestra Ensemble Work Campus Festivals Choir	House Trips Ski Trips Language Trips Football Basketball School Proms Seagull and London Theatre
Other Arts	Social and Leisure Activities	Field Trips
Educational Dance Drama Art/Design Writers in School Bookswap Book Club	Ice Skating Camping Chess 4th Year Club Discos Computer	Great Gaddesden Odell Farm Netherswell Local Studies (Brickworks, Downs, Nature, etc)

Professional Development

The school philosophy document (1986) articulated the belief that professional development must be concerned with all aspects of school life and the relationship between the school and its environment, which contributed to the development of teachers both as individuals and as a group. It should be directly related to the needs of the individual teacher and the needs of the school, but take into consideration the child’s environment. Since the importance of professional development was recognised by the Jones Report (1982), the school had developed a policy

where responsive sharing opportunities, experiences and insights took place. This was a conscious attempt to use individual skills and to share expertise by encouraging collaborative and co-operative learning strategies.

If this policy was successful then it would enable teachers to perform effectively within their roles and to develop a perception of their importance and regard within the corporate teaching philosophy of the school. It would also enable individuals to respond positively to change and to accept corporate responsibility for curriculum development. Professional development should also endeavour to prepare individuals for different or greater responsibilities, not the least by encouraging them to work positively as a team member and to promulgate the concept of individual ownership in the school. In this way individual worth would be recognised and job satisfaction enhanced.

The school was developing dissemination strategies, to maximise the sharing of ideas and the recording of experiences. All teaching staff had access to the following provisions which were co-ordinated by the Deputy Head (Pastoral), but opportunities were restricted by economic factors and the popularity of courses. The difficulty of finding cover for more than one member of staff absent at a time diminished the numbers of staff attending external courses.

Table 1.8 Professional Development

1. A support system of an experienced 'paired' teacher for probationary, new and supply staff. Local induction courses.
2. Conferences and courses at local and national level.
3. Access to full and part time degree and diploma courses.
4. Retraining courses.
5. Local and national community development projects.
6. 'Pooled' and cross-phase inset to improve skills, organisation, curricular and pastoral initiatives and to encourage accurate recording procedures.
7. Local courses for educational management.
8. Local courses to improve specific skills.
9. School based courses in response to identified need.
10. School based pastoral and counselling system.
11. School and Area Curriculum Development Panel.
12. School based year, subject and staff meetings.
13. Integrated day, team teaching and other co-operative staff initiatives.

The previous section sought to set out on the one hand the positive aims (of curriculum and staff development) of school, whilst the following section on the other hand illustrates the difficult realities that tended to frustrate that achievement.

Modifying Factors in School Performance

There was evidence of a well established pattern of 'creaming' external to the school of the most able children (in the intake year) at 9+. This had a serious influence upon the deployment of staffing and resources and had implications for pupil attainment and teacher expectation

There seemed to be an increasing incidence of social problems within the school and the local area which interfered with the learning and teaching process. The Warnock Report (D.E.S. 1978) encouraged teachers to respond to the special educational needs of all children and to be more responsible in the identification and assessment of needs within the classroom. To achieve this, teachers would require in-service training, specialist support, easily administered assessment procedures and guidelines for strategic response.

As a result of falling rolls the Special Needs Co-ordinator had a full time class responsibility. Professional support within the classroom, the production of materials and the assessment of individual problems were therefore severely restricted and liaison became increasingly difficult. The responsibility devolved upon the class teacher. Further restrictions in staffing levels had resulted in specialist staff not being replaced as they left the school. The cumulative effect of increasing demands could lead to the teacher being unable to cope with the challenges of the large numbers of special needs pupils within the class. This could result in a lower teacher expectation. Teachers might also be forced to develop strategies which restricted the influence of some children in an attempt to direct their expertise where it would have the most effect. The Elton Report (DES,1989) recognised that:

'The behaviour of these difficult children can also have a serious effect on the progress of other pupils. Even the most skilled teachers might find themselves having to spend most of their lesson trying to maintain order'. (DES, 1989, page 132)

Unstreamed classes of 30+ might not be viable in this circumstance. There was growing awareness of increasing tension between the school and the home, particularly with those families that were under stress. Truancy was sometimes encouraged by parents when children were used to look after siblings whilst parents were at work; or supported when children were discovered playing truant. Family holidays were taken during term time, causing a lack of continuity in the child's education. It had proved impossible to recruit the full complement of parent governors and financial support for the school was poor due to the economic problems of the area.

Increasing pressure upon teachers was becoming evident. The incidence of teacher absence through illness was escalating and though cover was granted by the County Council in most cases, it was not possible in five cases during the spring term of 1987 to find a supply teacher. This was about average for each term. The onus for finding cover was on the school and caused increased work pressure on the senior staff and secretaries when emergency cover was required. This was compounded by the necessity to plan for such cover. Further, the nature of the problems precluded the opportunity to choose appropriate cover and the school was forced by necessity to accept whatever was available. Many supply staff also refused to undertake administrative duties outside their hours of employment - quite rightly - but this caused many problems. Supply staff were not employed until 9.30 a.m., which was forty minutes after the morning session began. This period had to be covered by staff already responsible for their own classes. Lunchtime and after school duties were also affected.

During the school year 1986-87, three senior staff were on maternity leave and only one returned to work; two staff left and were replaced by temporary teachers; there was one probationer, and one member of staff away on secondment. This meant that six teachers were absent out of a

total of fourteen. One first year class had three teachers in one year. In many cases, extra responsibility devolved on individual staff for pastoral or subject development - often teachers who already carried a heavy load. For example one teacher was Head of Mathematics, Head of Computer Studies, Head of Science and Head of House.

The quality and fabric of the school buildings and cleanliness of the surrounding play areas were deteriorating as the result of 'rationalisation' in spending. To economise on clearing and heating some rooms had been closed and cleaning reduced in others. Teaching staff had become involved in cleaning and decorating in an attempt to maintain their teaching areas as light and interesting places in which to learn. The ancillary staff had their hours reduced. This gradual deterioration in the teaching environment and the redistribution of cleaning responsibility to the teaching staff was a contributing factor in increasing stress for both teachers and children:

'The continued deterioration in the general condition of interior decoration of a high proportion of schools of all kinds is disturbing. This is known to have a depressing effect upon the quality of education'. (HMI, 1986)

In a small school with diminishing rolls environmental and teacher support factors became increasingly significant:

'The dissatisfaction in middle schools with the amount of non-Teaching Assistants and clerical support has continued to increase'. (HMI, 1986)

The curriculum was also under pressure. A small middle school had great difficulty in maintaining a curriculum based staffing policy. Staffing instability, insufficient resources and large classes had contributed to low morale, increasing stress and decreasing motivation:

'It must again be emphasised most strongly that without the implementation of a curriculum-led staffing policy, the curriculum in middle schools of fewer than 360 pupils is seriously at risk'.

‘Already in order to provide a full curriculum. most middle school are having to resort to class sizes of over 30 The other major factor is the pupil teacher ratio, which suffered a 6% cut in 1982 and has not improved in middle schools since then’. (HMI, 1986)

Because of the diminishing rolls and the variable intake, the research school had some classes of 30+ and some as low as 22. Unstreamed classes of 30+ were seen as very difficult to teach effectively and made some specialist subjects (Science, Woodwork and Metalwork) worrying from the safety aspect.

School support was being reduced. As the school numbers fell, reading support, the psychology service, school nurse and welfare officer had all had their contact time with the school reduced. However, the pool of children who needed support had tended to increase even though the school numbers fell. This also reduced teacher contact with expert sources of information and knowledge. The resource demands of the National Curriculum and the requirements post L.M.S. to ‘buy in’ expert help may lead to a diminished teacher expectation and further underachievement.

Juvenile crime in the local area was the highest in Bedfordshire (HMI, 1986) and there was evidence of increasing social tension. The school suffered sporadic attacks of vandalism but generally these were perpetrated by children who had not attended the school. Poor social conditions and few amenities may have been contributory factors to increased tension.

There were a number of interesting factors which became evident as the review progressed and which modified my approach to the research. The teachers seemed to believe that any inability to implement the school philosophy was a failure in themselves. They did not wish to communicate their perceived lack of ability to others in order to protect their own integrity and

to maintain a positive school spirit. The most conscientious and able teachers were having similar difficulties. This tended to encourage teachers to become insular and find excuses for the apparent underachievement of children in factors over which they felt they had little control.

It was clear however, that teachers were aware of the constraints which influenced their teaching but little effort was being made to identify or modify these factors on a corporate basis.

In this chapter I have sought to outline the aims of the work described in this thesis and how it developed. I have also sought to provide some necessary background about the setting—a middle school founded with optimism and high ideals, but by the late 1980's facing serious difficulties and declining morale. The next chapter looks at the literature concerned with underachievement followed by a chapter, divided into two sections, on the methods used in this study. Chapter 4 draws mainly on children's records to present quantitative findings on underachievement in the school and its relationship to the children's backgrounds and classroom behaviour ; a few case studies in Chapter 5 illustrate some of these points and also bring in some views of the parents. The next two chapters report children's views on what helps or hinders learning, and the teachers' views on underachievement. The final chapter seeks to bring together these findings and to consider their implications for teaching.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to make sense of the empirical observations made by teachers concerning underachievement, I needed to obtain a perception of the influencing factors as revealed in the research literature. The review was to have a greater authority than this, however, as it would enable me to clarify my own ideas as to the definition of underachievement, methods of identification and the issues concerned with the causes of underachievement. Further, it would provide the basis for a common coding frame to apply to my later field work which would facilitate comparisons between various views of underachievement and identify the research method by which I was to proceed.

Definition of Underachievement

The notion of underachievement seems to accord with a common sense view of assessment. Teachers observe children who seem to achieve less than is believed to be their potential. This shortfall between achievement and potential is seen to be underachievement. At the classroom level, however, the concept is rather confused (Thorndike and Hagen, 1969). Teachers often seem to have difficulty in identifying the difference between the genuine slow learners and underachievers, and confuse a variety of learning, social and behavioural disabilities with educational under-functioning (Vincent and Cresswell, 1976). A more systematic approach would be to treat the identification of underachievement as a special kind of diagnosis. In this way underachievement is defined by the difference between potential and actual level of functioning, as measured on an achievement test (Satterly, 1985). A child of average or high I.Q. but whose level of functioning is below average can therefore be expected to be underachieving and an explanation sought in terms of environmental, personal

or social factors (Vincent and Cresswell, 1976). In using tests in this way it is wise to be aware of the limitations of accuracy imposed by the test's reliability and to attempt to establish a stability by using tests at different stages in the child's development (Child, 1993). Further (Thorndike and Hagen, 1969), the reliability of a difference between two tests is substantially lower than the reliabilities of the two tests taken separately. It is also sensible to be aware of the depressing effect of deprived social background (Block and Dworkin, 1976), cultural bias (Singh, 1993) and gender differences (Morgan and Dunn, 1988) on test scores, especially when applying tests to an unrepresentative population sample.

It is also evident that whilst some children have an I.Q. which is substantially higher than their standardised achievement scores, there are other children for whom the reverse is true. On the evidence of the tests, these children are presumably 'overachievers'. In spite of the reservations about the accuracy of assessing underachievement by the comparison of I.Q. and achievement tests, the methods remain the best we have:

'Nevertheless, although the concept is confused knowledge that a child has an average or high I.Q. in spite of low achievement can be useful in alerting the teacher to look for possible casual factors in the child's environment'.
(Satterly, 1985).

Identification of Underachievement

Historically, teachers rely on anecdotal records which are informal and semi-formal observations of the child's progress. They are usually for the purpose of increasing understanding of the child's difficulties, observing improvement or deterioration in the child's functioning, or to serve as a record for those who may deal with the child at a later date (Donnison, 1974). As a tool for day-to-day management and in conjunction with more systematic observation and testing, they can be useful in building up a profile of the child's

abilities. Taken alone however, and used as appraisal measures for assessing underachievement, they are of limited value:

‘They are likely to be couched in general terms, often moralistic in tone evaluating rather than describing and telling more about the teacher’s reactions to the child than about the child’. (Thorndike and Hagen, 1969)

The terms that this assertion refers to are those which are well known to teachers:

1. Carole can do better if she tries harder and does not waste her time in idle chatter.
2. Steven can be bright but too often persists in annoying behaviour.

These types of comment reveal the teacher’s vague realisation that underachievement may be attributable to factors other than intellectual under-functioning but tend to reinforce the child’s perception of failure and guilt. It is likely that the child’s under-functioning may be directly attributable to the teacher’s failure to diagnose difficulties, develop supportive teaching strategies and to target resources (Kerry, 1982).

Anecdotal records tend also to interpret instead of reporting. Teachers make conclusions as to the reasons for children’s underachievement on the most meagre of evidence, and describe in general terms rather than being specific (Rowntree, 1977). However, the team approach to assessment, where teachers discuss and compare independent observations, and the development of in-service training seem to improve the quality of teacher’s appraisal of underachievement. A further refinement might be to apply a diagnostic procedure involving the application of personality or behavioural profiles to a class units. This requires specific training in observation techniques (Wood and Naphali, 1975). This is based on the assertion that underachieving children tend to display similar behavioural and social traits (Kerry,

1982) and respond to a similar range of personal and inter-personal needs (McInerney, Roche and Marsh, 1997).

A Profile of the Underachiever

Nason (1968) asserts that there are six basic factors which encourage high achievement levels. The lack of any one of these he asserts may lead to underachievement. These six factors are:

(Table 2.1)

1. Satisfactory personal and social adjustment.
2. A positive attitude to school.
3. A clear personal goal.
4. Good parental expectation
5. Parental support for goals.
6. A sense of inspiration or encouragement to succeed.

Kerry (1982) found that teachers had difficulty in identifying underachieving children because:

they became skilled at deception,
teachers have too little time to seek them out,
diagnostic procedures are inadequate,
teachers have a too narrow view of 'brightness',
little is known of how to draw out these pupil's skills,
parents/teachers are largely unaware of the situation.

This was in spite of the fact that underachieving children correlated positively with a number of common factors in terms of attitudes and behaviour;

anti-school,

orally knowledgeable but poor in written work,

apparently bored, restless or inattentive,

absorbed in a private world,

tactless or impatient of slower minds,

friendly with older pupils or adults,

excessively self-critical,

unable to make good social relationships,

with peer group and/or teacher,

emotionally unstable,

outwardly self-sufficient.

A different approach to the identification of underachieving children would be possible if qualitative information could be collected relating to the child's environment. The National Child Development Study (1972) found environment features to be possible causative factors in children's poor performance. These factors seemed to contribute to rising levels of anxiety which interfered with the child's level of functioning and produced a progressively poor self-image. There seemed to be also a correlation between poor performance and negative forms of classroom behaviour (D.E.S. 1989). However, the radical range of children's ability to adjust to difficulties in their lives and the difficulty of collecting qualitative information from a variety of professional sources makes this approach impractical at the classroom level. There are also serious ethical considerations concerning the use of confidential records.

Issues Concerned with Underachievement

In order to focus on the relevant causative factors of underachievement within the school I decided to review those issues which help to explain the theoretical and conceptual approach I wished to adopt. Initially, I wish to immerse myself in the general research findings in order to begin to conceptualise the relative importance of different factors in underachievement, to make sense of the empirical comments of teachers and to begin the task of developing a common coding frame for my own fieldwork.

Influence of the Home

The early influence of the home upon the child's attitude to learning and of the child's ability to develop skills and strategies have the greatest single effect upon the child's later learning ability (Craft, 1974). By the age of four, the basic parameters of language acquisition have been developed by most children (D.E.S 1975) and the environment that the child inhabits, the relationships developed within the family and the child's interaction with the individual members of that family all influence the later learning process. (Tough, 1976)

The mother's role has been identified as crucial to the early linguistic development of the child. Often, the disadvantaged child has been discouraged from initial language activities (Davis, Butler and Goldstein, 1972) and consequently intellectual energies and inclinations may be stifled and physical development retarded. Further, the process of socialisation is not encouraged, which further disadvantages some children when they enter school:

‘We have been told that some of the children now entering nursery and reception classes lack the basic social skills needed to talk and play with other children’ (D.E.S. 1989).

Research also suggests that later anti-social behaviour, aggression and underachievement can be directly related to the quality of the child's home experiences (West, 1982) and lack of sympathetic guidance and support in the home are key factors in encouraging such deterioration. Lefkowitz (1977) cites evidence that extremes of parental behaviour - both permissive and punitive - can be symptoms of neglect, but the most difficult for the child to cope with is inconsistency. Anxiety can also be a cause of later behavioural problems:

'Thorough investigation...often reveals a failure of relationships within the child's home. In some cases the parents may be neglectful or incompetent...In others, illness, divorce or the acquisition of step-parents produces an atmosphere of tension. Even in some apparently good homes the child may feel rejected (causing) aggressive and withdrawn behaviour'. (Segal, 1967)

Divorce and Separation

Children of divorced or separated parents run twice the risk of having personal problems ranging from poor educational performance to psychiatric disorders, which can be quite severe in later life (Rogers, 1998). A definitive study of two hundred current studies on the issue was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently (Rogers and Pryor, 1998). The research concluded that poor school performance, aggressive behaviour and social problems could result from the stresses resulting from divorce or separation. Further, school attendance, illness and school refusal were likely to be secondary symptoms of this stress. In early adulthood a high incidence (nearly twice the norm) was recorded in respect of early parenthood, smoking, drinking and drug misuse. This survey seemed to confirm a recent study in America:

‘Previous work identified families who experienced a high rate of change in and divorce, single parenthood, financial difficulties, drug abuse and criminal with achievement and behaviour.

(Garnier, Stein and Jacobs, 1997)

However, this seeming cause and effect does not acknowledge the complexity of factors which impinge on families before, during and after separation.

Later Home Influences

Many studies have investigated the relationship between family size and underachievement in school. The difference in reading attainment between the first and later born children is often quite marked in large families (D.E.S. 1975). Large families could also impede the child in acquiring adequate facilities for study or private reading. Overcrowding may also cause constant interruption by family and friends and for children to work whilst there are radio or television noises:

‘When one examines the home background of delinquents or even children who are backward at school one cannot help remarking how frequently they are members of large families and recent studies confirm that numbers coming from such families are indeed disproportionate’. (Stott, 1976)

Family size may also make it necessary for both parents to work and indeed research indicates that there has been a radical increase in unsupervised children as a result of both parents working (Social Trends, 18, 1988). The commitment to the financial welfare of the family has implications for the personal and social development of the children and may result in the lack of supervision, encouragement and interest at crucial times of the child’s development. (D.E.S. 1967)

The ‘only’ child seems to be advantaged linguistically than does a child of a large family. Higginbotham, (1961) found a marked linguistic superiority in ‘only’ children.

It is also interesting to note the relative difference between boys and girls in early language acquisition:

‘In nearly every phase of language studied, girls were superior to boys’ (McCarthy, 1957) ‘but this may be the result of gender stereotyping and early unequal teacher expectation’. (Meek, 1991)

‘Inspection findings, National Curriculum assessment results and research continues to the point to the unachievement of boys in English’. (Ofsted, 1997)

Later school behavioural problems and aggressive attitudes were identified as four times more likely to involve boys than girls, and boys were more likely to be rated lower than girls by teachers (D.E.S. 1989). The teacher’s attitude is also different to boy and girls:

‘There is some evidence that staff are not as strict with boys as with girls. They are more likely to extend deadlines for work, to have lower expectations of boys, to be more tolerant of disruptive, unruly behaviours from boys in the classroom’. (Mitsos and Brown, Volume 8, Number 1, 1998)

Parental Attitude to Education

The influence of the home and attitude of the parents towards education seem to be crucial in encouraging the child’s linguistic development and developing stable attitudes and aspirations (Mortimer, 1988). Positive parental encouragement can influence the child’s desire for academic attainment. The willingness to help their child with homework, the provision of books and magazines within the home and the encouragement to read are all important factors in the child’s acquisition of positive learning skills, (Douglas, 1964) and in the use of the library, the support given to the child’s interests, the variety of visits and holidays provided and positive encouragement, the parent can encourage a positive attitude towards learning in the child (D.E.S 1967). It is noticeable that underachievers are characterised most often by uncooperative parents displaying either indifference to the child’s

plight or aggression towards the school. Quite often the parent will even connive with the child in unnecessary absence or truancy (D.E.S 1989). This attitude to the school has implications for the way in which the school advertises its courses, manages its relationships and communicates to the parents (Galloway, 1982).

Regular visits to the school and a healthy development of the partnership between parent and school is crucial in promoting the child's progress and dealing with problems:

‘One of the crucial aspects of the school in respect of its values is the gap between pupils, parents and teachers’. (Stenhouse, 1975)

Parental attitudes to homework and further study and knowledge of the school process and parental discipline regarding homework, late nights and television viewing, were significant factors for academic success (Wong, 1990). Underachievement or aggressive and disruptive behaviour in the classroom can often be a means by which a child from an unsupportive home background attracts the teacher's attention to the inadequacy of the curriculum or to learning difficulties experienced by the children. (Steed and Lawrence, 1988)

(Figure 2.2, and Appendix 6) Poverty

The present economic climate is particularly damaging to poor families or families under stress. There is an economic incentive for both parents to work and the statistics indicate that divorce, the incidence of one parent families, the number of families on income support, the number of mortgage repossessions, and the level of family related crimes are on the increase.

(Jowell, 1988)

‘There is then, ample evidence of a link between reading failure and socio-economic, disadvantage and a relationship with emotional disturbance’.
(D.E.S. 13:20, 1975)

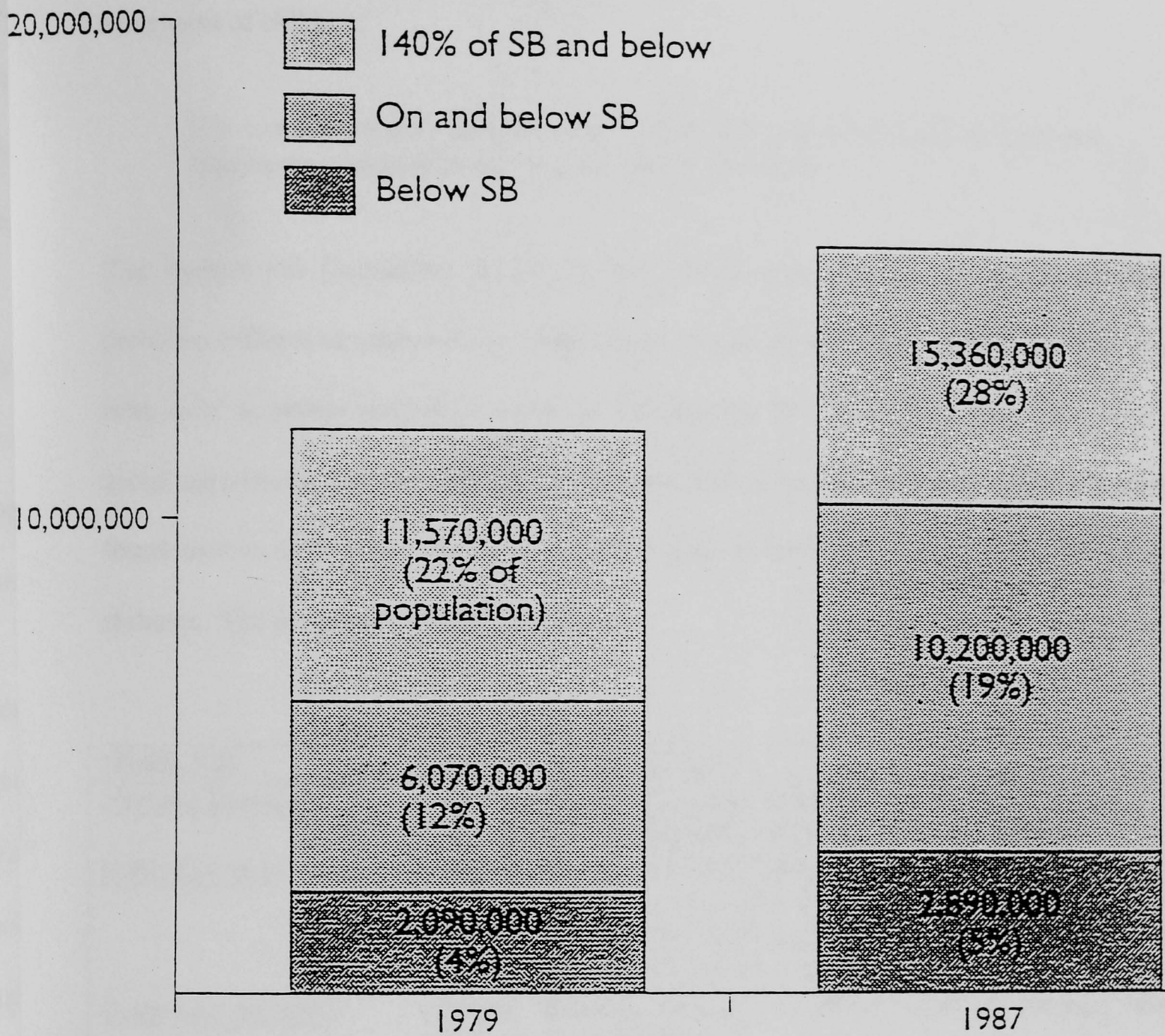
This can lead to anti-social behaviour on the part of the child; anxious and withdrawn symptoms, psycho-somatic illness, truancy and violence (D.E.S. 1989). The Government Statistical Service publications (Social Trends, 1988) reveals an alarming increase in family stress and child poverty. Research suggests that the majority of persistent behaviour problems, underachievement and truants, live in homes that are lacking in material advantages and endure high levels of anxiety and emotional tension (Galloway, 1982).

Douglas et al (1968) found that children from different social backgrounds showed variations in I.Q. and achievement. These difficulties seemed to be related to social deprivation and widened as the children grew older. The greatest influence seemed to be on the average to above-average children (Wiseman, 1964).

Emotional Disturbance

It is often difficult to separate this factor from the home background in which it may be rooted (Child, 1993). So often teachers see only symptoms of the problem and are not aware of the true causes of poor achievement. The inertia present between social services, school, welfare services, medical services, police and the psychology service can impede the free exchange of information and prevent adequate targeting of resources for the child. Anxious parents are unwilling to share information. Research suggests that underachievement is caused by a multiplicity of emotional factors (Speilburger and Gaundry, 1972), but that the specific anxiety leading to a crisis could usually be traced to one important event which overwhelmed the child's ability to cope with consistent levels of anxiety from other sources - divorce, parental illness or death, criminal activity, drug abuse or sexual assault are common

(Figure 2.2) THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY



Number of people living in or on the margins of poverty in 1979 and 1987 as measured at 140 per cent of Supplementary Benefit and below.

(Oppenheim, 1990)

factors. A substantial research project was begun in 1964 by the N.F.E.R., to study the factors in the organisation of a school which might influence the attitudes, behaviour and attainment of children:

‘To exert a positive influence on educational attainment and on personal development and social adjustment’ (McNally, 1965).

The Underwood Committee (D.E.S., 1955) investigated the way in which emotional problems influenced achievement. They found six groups of symptoms which could range from mild to severe and which could be modified by the child’s personality, the level of social adjustment and the stability of the home and school environment. The committee found that in most cases the school could provide a therapeutic environment for anxious children. The six groups of symptoms are:

(Table 2.3)	Emotional Disturbance
<u>Nervous Disorders</u>	fears and anxiety; marked solitariness and timidity; depression and obsession, excitability apathy; hysteria and amnesia
<u>Habit disorders</u>	speech defects and stammering (other than those caused by physical defects) excessive daydreaming, sleeplessness and nightmares; facial and body tics, nail biting, rocking, bedwetting, and symptoms such as asthma and allergies
<u>Behaviour disorders</u>	temper tantrums, destructive, defiant or cruel; stealing, lying, truancy; sex aberrations
<u>Organic disorders</u>	neurological dysfunctioning; head injuries, brain tumours; epilepsy
<u>Psychotic disorders</u>	hallucinations, delusions, bizarre behaviour
<u>Educational disorders</u>	lacking concentration; irregular response to school discipline; slow learning - particularly in reading skills

Personality

Thorndike and Hagen (1969) cite a number of variables which are considered to influence children’s performance in response to the environment in which they operate:

(Table 2.4)	Personality
<u>Character</u>	Certain qualities defined by society as estimable or undesirable.
<u>Adjustment</u>	The degree of ability to fit into and live happily in the culture in which one is placed.
<u>Temperament</u>	Qualities relating to energy levels, mood and style of life.
<u>Interests</u>	Activities that are sought or avoided.
<u>Attitudes</u>	Reactions for or against the people, the phenomena and the concepts that make up society.

This suggests that the personality acts as a mediating factor for the way in which children cope and respond to crises in their lives.

Personality has been defined as:

‘the dynamic organisation within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behaviour and thought’ (Allport, 1963, Cited in Child, 1993).

If this definition is accepted then it seems inevitable that personality influences both classroom behaviour and academic achievement. However, the measurement of personality is far from simple. The terms of reference are wide and influencing variables may make analysis very difficult. (Child, 1993)

Maslow (1970) has conceptualised a hierarchy of needs and suggests that certain needs, such as the need for positive self-esteem, are unlikely to be met unless more basic needs, such as physiological or social needs, are first satisfied. Burns (1982) cites evidence to suggest that progression through Maslow’s hierarchy may be necessary for effective classroom performance to be achieved. Cognitive anxiety is an obstacle to learning, since a high state of anxiety seems to produce a pre-occupation with potential threats, fear of failure and lack of security: these all seem to constrain effective functioning within the classroom. A positive self-image is required in order to learn efficiently as is the need to be valued in the learning situation. (Table 2.5)

Anxiety

In relationship to the study anxiety can be seen in Epstein's (1959) terms:

‘A state of undirected arousal following a perceived threat of danger’.

Whereas fear is seen as a specific threat, anxiety relates to a more insidious and vaguely perceived threat. Anxiety may be described as a feeling of unease about future events that might be threatening. It can be seen as multidimensional but four dimensions relate specifically to this study:

Cognitive

Inter-Personal

Behavioural

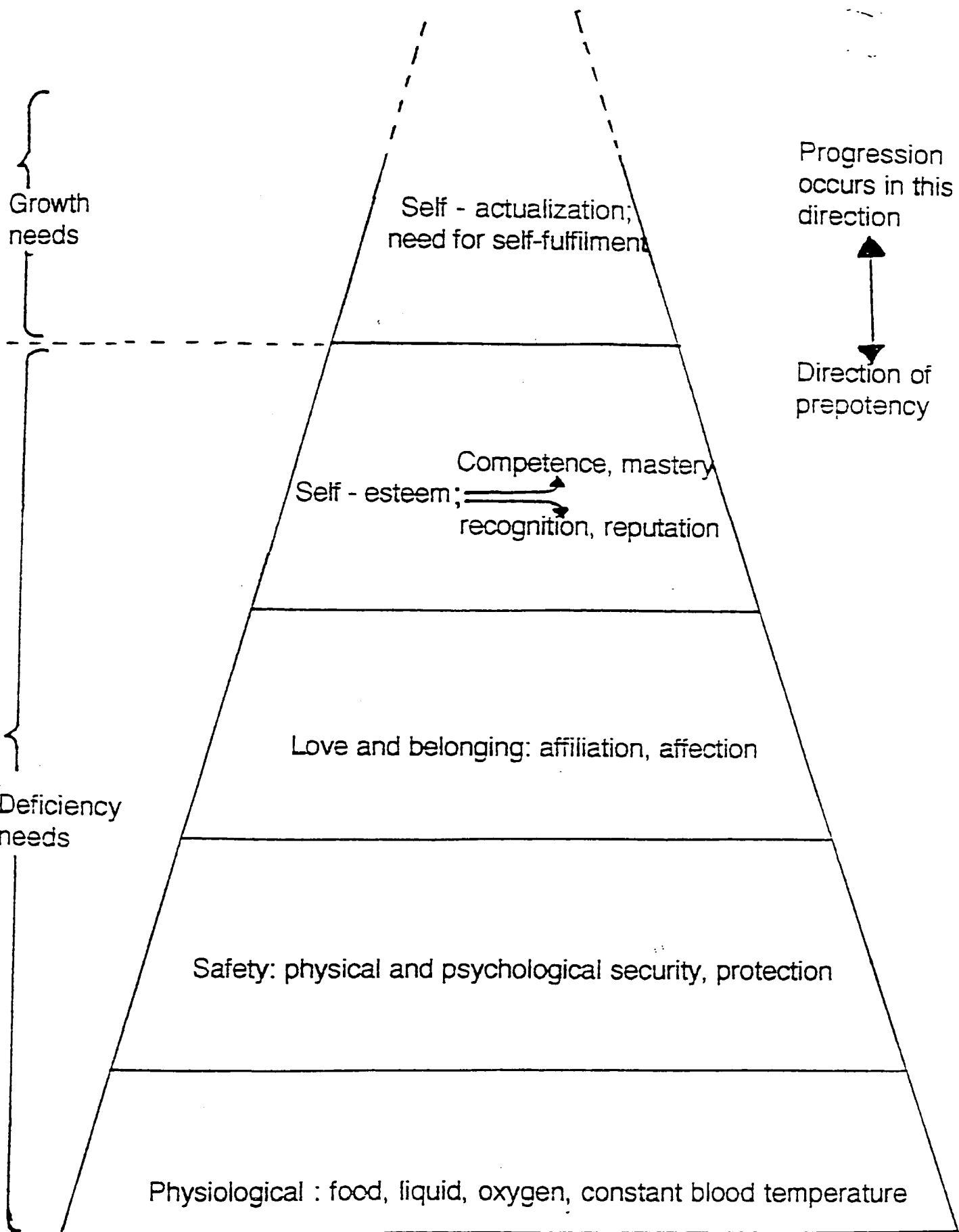
Physiological

The cognitive dimension recognises a conscious awareness of danger, of an inability to cope with a perceived threat. The interpersonal dimension refers to the threat induced by the withdrawal of affection by someone who is important to the individual. The behavioural dimension may be manifested by the adoption of avoidance behaviours. The physiological dimension is manifested in somatic responses to anxiety - the heart rate may increase and they may be a psychogalvanic skin response.

This link between anxiety and classroom problems is well reported in the literature, Phillips (1978) reports a strong link between lack of achievement and high anxiety levels as measured on the Children's School Questionnaire (C.S.Q.). Lightfoot (1951) reports a link between high levels of anxiety and poor performance on intelligence tests. (Gaudry and Spielberger 1974) reports numerous studies linking high anxious children with poor performance in

(table 2.5) A HIEARCHY OF BASIC NEEDS

(Maslow, 1970)



school. The influence of anxiety on performance and the mediating factors are elegantly illustrated by Child (1993) in the following diagram (Figure 2.6).

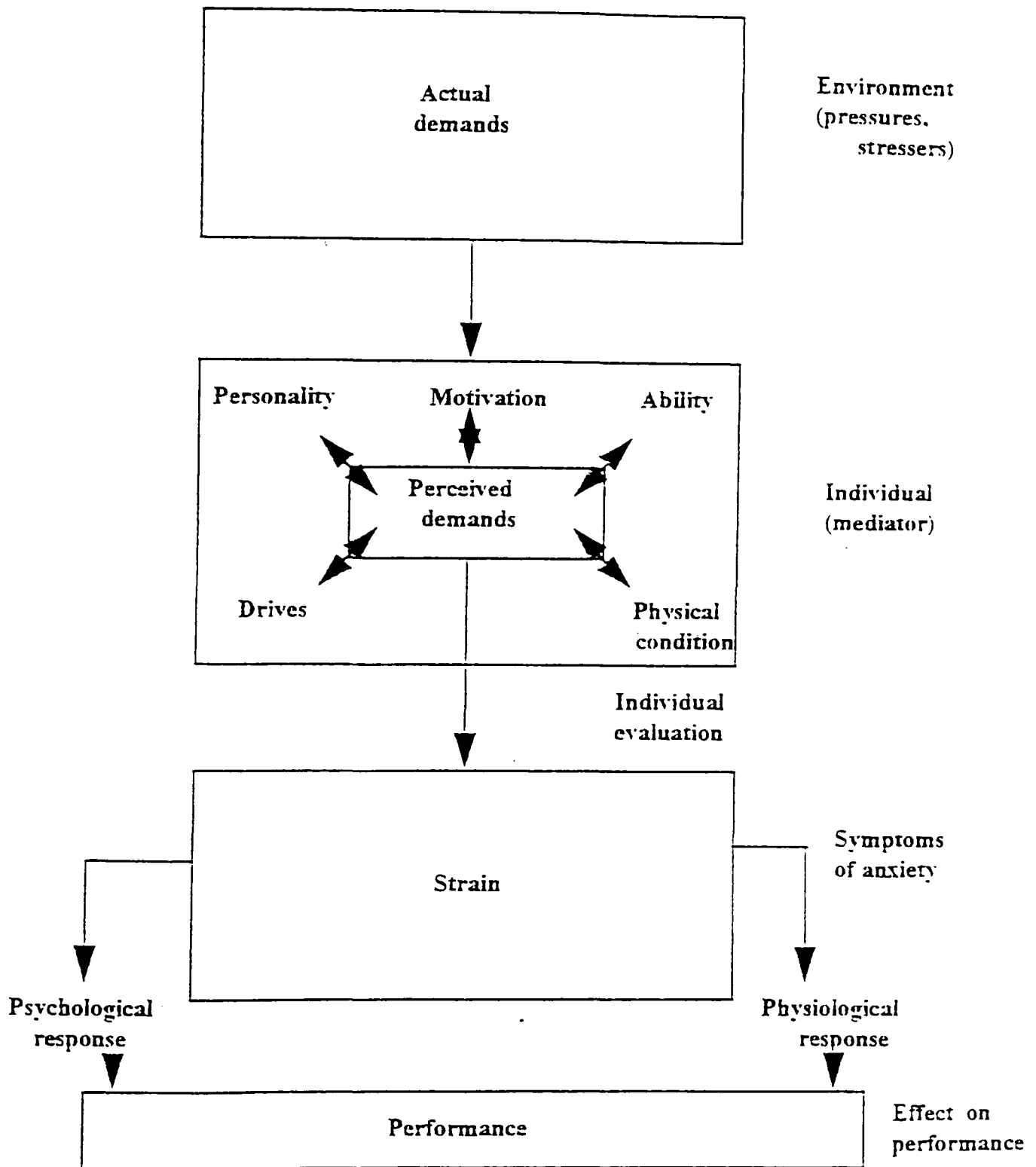


Figure 2.6 : Stress and Influence on Underachievement

Cultural Influences

Immigrant bilingual problems especially where languages are very diverse, (English-Chinese), can impede good language acquisition (MacNamara, 1986) and the child may progress well in both languages if good communication is not maintained with parents.

The different attitudes to education and the perception of the role that the school plays in their children's aspirations can lead to parental confusion (Townsend, 1971).

Problems of culture, religion and morality can interfere with socialisation and are the source of anxiety, violence or frustration when children are unable to adjust to different cultural pressures (DE.S. 1985). Further parents who do not speak English, parents who are not literate in their own language or parents who speak a minority dialect can make it very difficult for their children to achieve fluency in either language (MacNamara, 1986). The role of the female in some cultures is less likely to attract firm aspirations towards a career but the positive attitude of some cultures towards education can be utilised to encourage the development of effective liaison systems. Further, testing can be culturally biased and makes both bilingual and bicultural assessment and the evaluation of ability quite difficult to achieve (Satterley, 1985).

Underachievement can be the result of both severe social deprivation and 'hidden' racism (Singh, 1993).

'West indian children on average are underachieving at school. Asian children, by contrast show on average a pattern of achievement which resembles that of white children...Bangladeshi children in particularly are seriously underachieving'. (Singh, 1985)

This differential in school achievement across ethnic groups may be the result of a number of general factors (Sue and Okazaki, 1990). These include:

- a) motivational differences in the individual's desire to improve their lives (Buriel and Cardoza, 1998);
- b) differences in parental education and sociometric status (Laosa, 1982);
- c) differences in parental expectations for children's achievement (Wong, 1990);
- d) variations in the congruence between the cultural practices of the school and the cultural practices of the home (Delgado - Gaitan, 1992);
- e) societal oppression of specific minority groups which may lead to the development of avenues of achievement which are not defined in terms of the dominant white majority (Ogbu, 1992);
- f) poverty and economic deprivation of ethnic minorities in terms of employment prospects and housing (Singh, 1985).

Achievement may also be influenced by school processes: (Trowler, 1995)

1. Misassessment of minority pupils. This refers to the use of assessment procedures which are culturally biased and which tend to confirm stereotypes already held by teachers.
2. Misplacement : this is placement in bands or streams as the result of behaviour of as the result of test performance only.
3. Channelling the over-representation of say Afro-Caribbean students into sports teams rather than academic pursuits being seen as more appropriate activities.

The Department of Environment analysis of 1991 Census listed twelve areas of Britain with the highest level of social/economic deprivation. Ten were areas with highest concentrations of ethnic minorities. The analysis also revealed in a district where 80% of the black communities lived, the instances of overcrowding and of shared amenities were three times greater than elsewhere. Pringle (1971) found a correlation between multiple disadvantage (overcrowding, poverty, single parenthood) and poor achievement. In the white population

6% of all children were found to be suffering multiple disadvantage whilst Little (1978) found this figure to be 18% amongst West Indian children. Another influence may be a 'hidden' curriculum of assumptions, attitudes and values and may take the form of bias in school text books or inappropriate choice of reading books. It may also be expressed in the way by which a school organises its groupings (Saunders, 1982) so that it leads to a preponderance of say West Indian children in low-attainment groups. Institutional racism may also use discriminatory discipline methods, testing and assessment techniques which are biased and teaching materials which are ethnocentric. There may also be a tendency to have few black teachers appointed, all serving to devalue the skills and abilities brought to the classroom and failing to provide positive role models for minority groups (Luthra, 1997).

The idea that the lower achievement of some non-white races is due to genetic inferiority was expressed in the studies of Eysenck (1973) and Jenson (1973) and enshrined in the Government Report for the Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council (1964):

There is further danger that educational backwardness which in fact is due to environment, language or different culture may increasingly be supposed to arise from some inherent or genetic 'inferiority' presumably among ethnic minority children'. (D.E.S. Report, 1964)

This genetic theory of educational failure has been severely criticised in the Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups (DES, 1965) but children from ethnic minority origins are still cited as the principal cause of a decline in academic standards (Honeyford, 1984) and form a disproportionately large section of the school community referred to special schools (Tomlinson, 1981). This may be the result of unintentional racism on the part of teachers;

‘ a well intentioned and apparently sympathetic person may as a result of his education experiences or environment, have negative, patronising or stereotyped views about ethnic minority groups which may subconsciously affect his attitude and behaviour towards members of those groups (DES, 1981).

There is a need for schools to be more sensitive to the needs of minority groups and scrutinise the way in which the schools are organised and resourced:

‘Since some institutional and individual racism are perceived here as part of the hidden curriculum, they are, by definition unplanned and often unobtrusive. The basis of their eradication must be through a process of general sensitisation and the resulting commitment’ (Hawkes, 1966).

(examining the composition)of staff and pupils leading to the scrutiny of traditional patterns of organisation and behaviour, the monitoring of teaching materials and other resources and the increased appointment of staff from ethnic minority groups (Saunders, 1982).

Intervention can be effective but only if teachers are aware of discrimination and produce a positive corporate policy by which to combat it (Singh, 1993).

To identify positive and negative aspects of achievement in order to affect modification, it may be useful to pool the perceptions of teachers, children and parents (Makins, 1984).

‘Travellers’ Children

‘ are probably the most severely deprived children in the country’ (DES, 155, 1967).

They often do not attend school until very much later than the norm or attend school infrequently. When they do enter school they often have neither the stability, skills or social attitudes to cope with the situation and are caught in a continual cycle of deprivation and

failure. Parental attitudes may present positive action from being taken as well as poor levels of expectation by teachers.

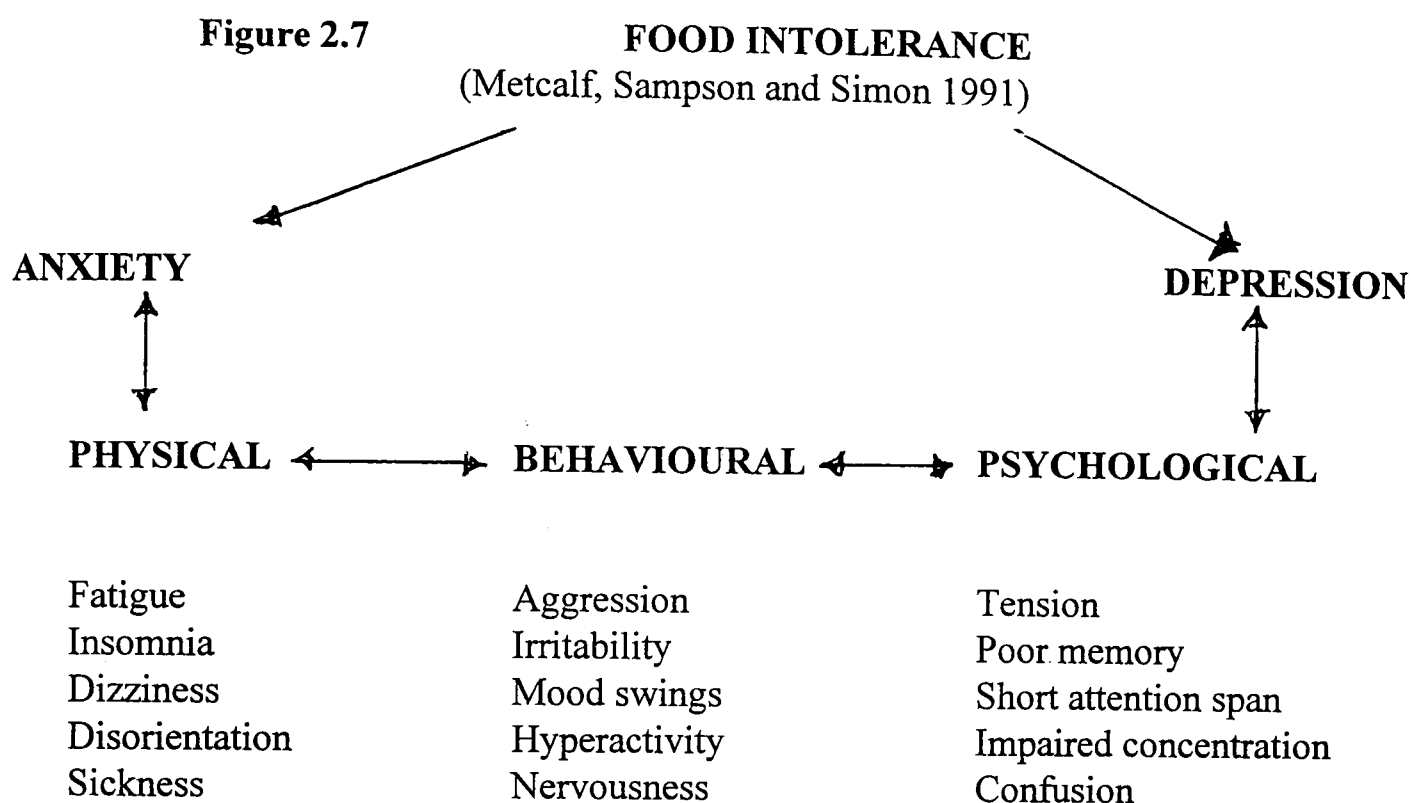
Medical Problems

Long term medical problems and extended hospitalisation can result in children falling behind or being allowed to work below their capacity (DES, 838, 1967). Hearing problems can influence the child's ability to differentiate between some sounds and poor auditory perception can make learning to read difficult (DES, 101, 1975). Hearing problems can be diagnosed and remedied and auditory problems tend to disappear of their own accord during the primary school years, but if either problem was manifest during the initial teaching of reading then lasting problems may occur, leading to backwardness or underachievement in the normal child or severe retardation in the dull child (Lewis, 1968).

Food Allergies, Reaction to Additives in Food and Environmental Pollutants

Recent research (Brostoff and Gamlin 1994) has associated asthma and hayfever and rhinitis, (congestion of the upper respiratory tract) with a cluster of symptoms such as hyperactivity, excitability, clumsiness, poor memory and short attention span, which may all be contributory factors to poor educational achievement. Symptoms secondary to the allergic response itself may have an affect on the brain. In severe cases, change in the amount of oxygen reaching the brain seems to influence both mood and behaviour and if normal breathing is affected during sleep, this may cause fatigue, drowsiness, short temper and mood swings during the following day (Metcalf, Sampson and Simon 1991). Chemical influences both in food and in the environment can increase the possibility of allergic reactions:

‘The main one, in our view, is the increasing exposure to man-made chemicals - food additives, pesticide residues, exhaust fumes, solvents, industrial pollutants and the like. It is known that a single massive exposure to a toxic chemical, such as a pesticide, can bring on a severe form of food intolerance’. (Brostoff and Gamlin, 1994)



Research shows that 25 - 30% of the population could be prone to allergic reactions to food (Hubbard, 1993) and the incidence is rising.

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

This is sometimes called Hyperkinetic Syndrome (Hyperactivity) or Minimum Brain Dysfunction (Barnes and Calquhoun, 1986). These are clusters of symptoms resulting from food allergies causing chemical changes in the body. These symptoms are typically physical, psychological and social and seem to be interactive (Rapp, 1986). Estimates of the number of children affected by ADD range from 1% to 20% of the school age population. There seems to be a genetic predisposition to allergic reactions with boys tending towards aggressive responses and girls tending to respond to the condition with mood swings or inattention. Changes in diet to avoid certain foods can cause dramatic improvements (Hubbard, 1993).

(Table 2.8) Symptoms of Attention Deficit Syndrome
(Brostoff and Gamlin 1994)

Overactive and excitable,

Unable to keep still, constantly fidgeting,

Poor concentration, short attention span, doesn't finish anything,

Sudden mood changes, unpredictable, explosive,

Cries easily and has emotional outbursts or temper tantrums,

Is aggressive, fights, bullies,

Cannot cope with criticism and is easily depressed,

Talks too fast or is difficult to understand,

Often seems to be irritable or unhappy,

Easily distracted, impulsive and becomes frustrated quickly,

Clumsy and poorly co-ordinated, confused and disorientated,

Unaffectionate and has a poor self - image,

Sleeps badly and is constantly thirsty.

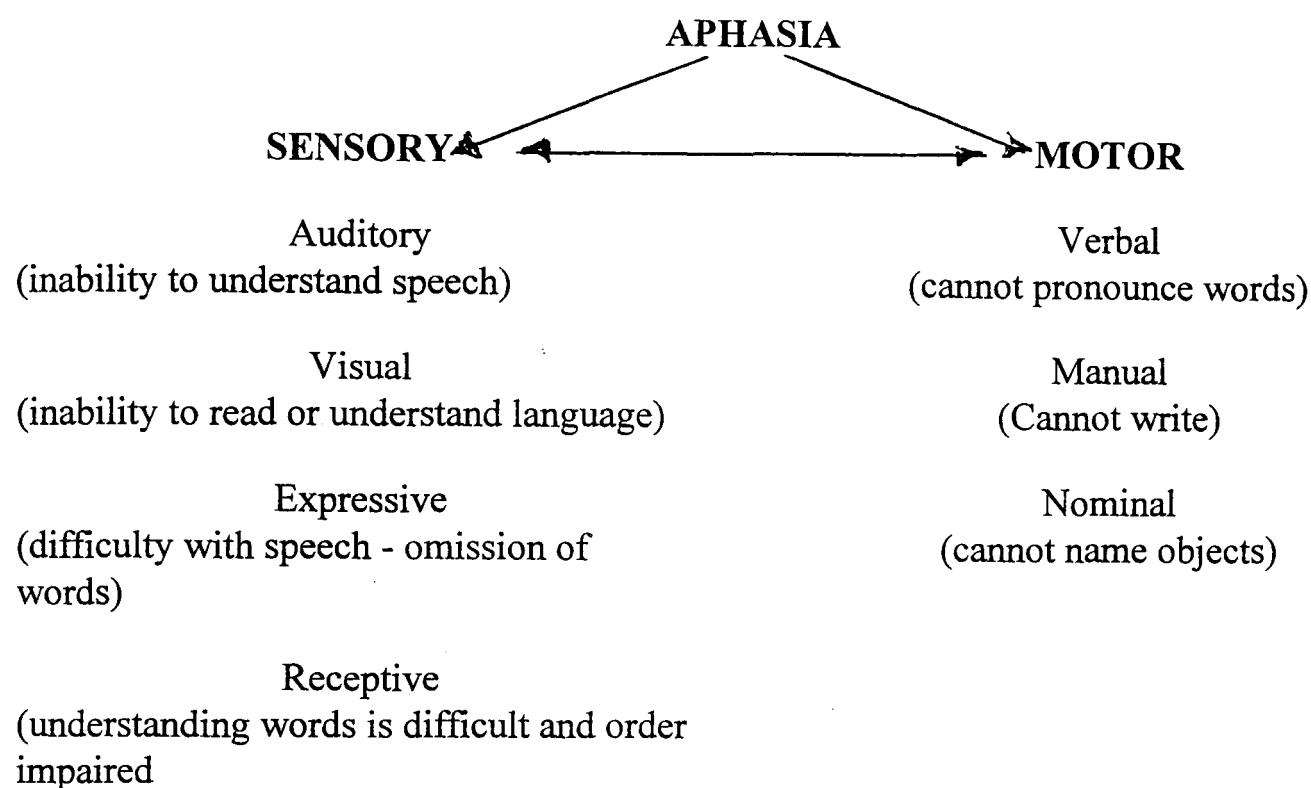
Apraxia

These are a group of symptoms which result from damage to the nerve tracts within the brain that govern cognitive association, motor control and co-ordination (Child, 1993). The damage may be caused by a variety of factors; physical injury, genetic abnormality, premature birth, infection, stroke or brain tumour (Smith, 1996). Various symptoms may manifest themselves, depending on the area of the brain that is damaged. A child with ideomatic apraxia may find it impossible to carry out a spoken command whilst agraphic aphasia (a special form of apraxia) causes difficulty in writing and expressive aphasia results

in difficulty in expressing language. Aphasia can affect the expressive and motor functions of the brain;

Table 2.9

Aphasia as a form Apraxia
(Child 1993)



A severe aphasia may influence other areas of the brain and affect development (Luria, 1970). Recovery is highly variable and depends upon the severity and position of the damage. Patience and considerable effort is required to diagnose and teach skills (for example, for brain damage resulting from premature birth) or to enable skills to be re-learned (for example, damage caused by a head injury). Some deficit usually remains.

Specific Learning Difficulties/Dyslexia

In children of normal intelligence, specific learning difficulties can lead to severe retardation, social and personality problems:

‘There still remains a percentage of children, who, despite apparent sound intelligence and often high ability in other area, just do not respond to traditional methods of learning...Many are never diagnosed...others are only identified by specialists when they are referred for behavioural

problems...problems which are essentially secondary to the central issue, namely the child's failure to progress in reading and writing'. (Congdon, 1982)

The cycle of constant failure has implications for the self-image of the child and symptoms of aggression, restlessness, withdrawn behaviour and disobedience may result as direct consequence of constant frustration (Speed and Lawrence, 1988).

On average at least one child per class is thought to be affected by dyslexia and more boys than girls. Signs of dyslexia can be an unusual development from an early age in the acquisition of language and in the development of physical co-ordination and memory.

(Dyslexia) "is independent of overall ability and conventional teaching. When untreated, there are significant limitations in the development of specific aspects of speech, reading, spelling, writing and sometimes numeracy - which may lead to secondary behavioural problems - although other areas of ability are unaffected". (Peer, 1994)

Peer also points out that dyslexics often have better visual, spatial and practical thinking skills than their peers.

There seem to be several types of dyslexia, including "acquired", "developmental" and "genetic". 'Acquired' dyslexia may be the result of minor brain damage caused by accidents, medical conditions like hydrocephalus or premature birth. Traumatic stress syndrome may also be a cause. 'Developmental' dyslexia is caused when the child's conceptual development is arrested and 'genetic' dyslexia is where there is family evidence to suggest that the condition is transmitted genetically. The research indicates that boys are twice as likely to be affected than girls (Ryden, 1992) and that dyslexic parents are likely to have dyslexic children.

The most common problems that a dyslexic might face are categorised below:

Table 2.0 Dyslexia	
Name of Problem	Symptoms
Concept reversal	writing or reading the exact opposite of the meaning of the word or phrase
Vertical disorientation	letters or words appear to be on the line above or below
Lateral disorientation	words or parts of a word appear in the wrong place along a line. (Sometimes the letters are in the reverse order when written down)
Fading	letters are clear to begin with but then they fade
Omitting words	only key words remaining
Omitting key words	key words being omitted

(Ryden, 1992)

Research suggests that 4% of the population (over two million people, of which 300,00 are children) are severely dyslexic, and a further 6% may have mild - moderate dyslexic difficulties (Peer, 1994).

The major cognitive weaknesses appear to be in working memory and this, coupled with difficulties in phonological processing, means that dyslexic children may have difficulties with many, if not all, of the stages of learning to read and write (Snowling, 1987).

In the classroom dyslexic children cause many difficulties for teachers; there is no consensus as to what effective teaching strategies can be used and there is a burden on the teacher to

identify, assess and teach these children - but untreated dyslexia can have severe consequences for the classroom;

“Untreated dyslexia is known to cause a problem of low motivation and self-esteem there is no doubt that severe weakness in literary acquisition is demoralising and can cause....withdrawal or overt behavioural difficulties”.
(Peer, 1994)

However, it has been established that a multi-sensory approach to teaching dyslexic children (Peer, 1994) demonstrated significant improvements in verbal, memory and performance skills and recent research at Hull University into the early identification of dyslexia using interactive computer programmes has proved successful. (Peer, 1994)

(Table 2.11) Symptoms of Dyslexia
(Heaton and Winterson, 1996)

<u>Skill</u>	<u>Symptom</u>
Reading	Progress is late and slow, seems to lack mental support, each attempt is a fresh start.
Spelling	Even more resistant than reading, the kinds of mistakes are distinctive - often seem unrelated to the standard orthography, sometimes "phonetic" sometimes not.
Writing	It is not so much the physical act of writing that is affected (although this may be troublesome) but letters may be reversed (b/d), strings disordered (lion/lain), words reversed (was/saw) Writing, letter formation and spelling are intertwined. These problems are common to all beginning readers and writers, but are far more severe and resistant with dyslexics.
Speech	Generally speech is not affected but occasionally it is late developing in dyslexics.
Numbers	Forming and orientating numbers may be difficult but the problem is more one of 'spelling', getting and retaining numbers in correct sequence.
Sequencing	This may take two forms - spatial, when letters have to be <i>arranged</i> in a certain order, and temporal when words have to be <i>said</i> in a certain order. The first characterises written and the second, spoken language. The logical sequencing of ideas also presents difficulties for older children.
Memory	Dyslexics may have difficulty in remembering order, sequence, instructions. What is learned on Monday is lost again on Tuesday. The connection between short term memory and long term memory seems to be at fault.
Orientation	Confusion between left and right, which occurs in all young children, is much more persistent in dyslexics. This sometimes means that they are seen as clumsy children.
Specific Tasks	Dyslexics are seen to have difficulty with a number of tasks. For example: colour naming, reading the time, repeating the months of the year (order of seasons, days of the week), learning multiplication tables, repeating back a long word, dressing, tying shoelaces and finding their way about school.

School Factors

The ethos and organisation of the school can have a marked effect upon individual pupils by dividing the slow child from the bright and reinforcing the disadvantage of the weaker child (Clegg and Megson, 1973). Disruptive and anti-social children often display serious learning difficulties are backward at school and underachieve (Galloway, 1982). Once this cycle of poor achievement and disruptive behaviour is allowed to become established, then it becomes increasingly difficult to modify. The school organisation and the curriculum it offers, the discipline it exerts and the standards it sets, can positively promote and re-inforce anti-school attitudes which may lead to underachievement and backwardness:

‘Failure at school is all too often assumed to be the failure of the pupil to respond rather than the failure of the school to stimulate’ (Partridge, 1968).

Where pupils perceive themselves to be rejected by the traditional school values they may seek to preserve their self-image and ameliorate high levels of anxiety by developing a pupil sub-culture which glorifies failure and poor behaviour. Once this is established even clever children may be unable to respond positively to the school ethos, and teachers become increasingly alienated (Hargraves, 1967).

For students who do not conform to the school routines, the classroom can be very threatening.

‘For most students some of the time, and for some students most of the time, the classroom comes close to resembling a cage from which there is no escape’ (Jackson, 1971).

In order to reduce the levels of anxiety that some pupils feel, children produce strategies in order to please the teacher or devalue the education process (Holt, 1969). Teachers may

encourage these responses quite intentionally by expressing their attitudes and opinions; by the way in which they arrange the curriculum, by the way in which they reward and discipline, and the way in which the classroom is organised. They may:

‘.....foster legitimate inequality through the ostensible meritocratic manner in which they reward and promote students...they create and reinforce patterns of social class, racial and sexual identification’ (Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

The destruction of dignity is implicit in this by reinforcing the concept that a few succeed at the expense of the many who fail. The attack upon the self-image of some children can leave them feeling inferior, unable and powerless and lead to underachievement and anti-social behaviour (Meigham, 1993).

However, the research suggests that performance and attainment in school were significantly improved when the teacher had high expectations of the pupils:

‘by what she said, by how and when she said it, by the formal expression, postures and perhaps by her touch, the teacher may have communicated to the children...that she expected improved intellectual performance. Such communications together with possible changes in teaching techniques may have helped the child learn by changing his self-concept, his expectations of his own behaviour, and his motivation, as well as his cognitive style and skills’ (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1970 cited in Child, 1993).

Makins (1984) found that children observed teachers with quite obsessive detail and that when the teacher left the classroom the children were more likely to continue quietly with the lesson when they were interested in the lesson and not used to restrictive discipline;

‘.....hundreds of teachers are managing to make school so interesting that there is no time or reasons for the old tricks and giggles and avoidance routines - and to establish a relationship with children makes the rituals of classroom warfare unthinkable’. (Makins, 1984)

This has implications for the importance of 'modelling' behaviours and attitudes by the teacher through physical and sub-linguistic signalling. (Cohen and Manion, 1981)

A small proportion of pupils who are underachieving in school, display few behavioural problems and have no overt problems that can be identified in their social, medical or educational background. For these children the causes may lie with poor motivation, poorly targeted curriculum objectives or poor teacher expectation (Bird, 1980). This latter tends to be self fulfilling prophecy, whereby children perform as expected. Disaffected children may view the curriculum as uninteresting or irrelevant to their needs and constant failure becomes entrenched and perpetuated (Bloom, 1971). The Elton Report (DES, 1989) makes a series of recommendations (3.27-28) to encourage teachers to develop good classroom practice, to minimise behavioural problems and create a positive classroom atmosphere. Rutter (1979) found that high achievement and good behaviour was associated with praise, reward, encouragement, well targeted lessons and an unthreatening classroom management style. It is possible for schools to minimise the influences of social disadvantage and improve pupil behaviour by the way in which it is organised (Mortimer, 1988). Further, a school which has a negative atmosphere and an ineffective curriculum can be modified:

'The way in which a school is run can be changed... We recognise that the difficulties involved in breaking into the vicious circle of ineffective performance and low morale can be great... For most schools, effective action starts with the recognition that behavioural problems cannot simple be attribute to factors outside the institution, such as pupil's home backgrounds'. (DES, 1989)

Teaching Influences

The relationships established between teachers and children and the attitudes and skills of teachers (Grey and Wilcox, 1995) can have a significant influence upon the way in which children learn and which groups within the classroom are the highest achievers. Gowan, Demos and Torrance in "Creativity: Its Educational Implications" (1967) indicate:

'Children learn best when given opportunities to learn in ways best suited to their motivations and abilities. Whenever teachers change their ways of teaching in significant ways, a different group of learners become the stars or high achievers'. (Gowan, Demos, Torrance, 1967)

These 'alterable' variables (as Bloom, 1979, referred to them) could be utilised to improve the achievement of children through modification of the curriculum, the choice of appropriate teaching methods and materials and the evaluating of the whole curriculum process:

'.....such alterable variables will do much to explain the learning process and will do more - to directly improve the teaching and learning processes in the schools'. (Bloom, 1979)

Brophy and Everson (1976) discovered that underachievers made significant progress when teachers provided systematic and personal feedback. Further, this progress was reinforced when both teacher and child was involved in identifying individual achievable goals. In particular, the way in which the child is treated and the classroom behaviour of the teacher can significantly influence the achievement of individual children. Ainscow and Tweddle (1979) discovered that for some pupils the way in which they learnt was often as important as what they learnt. For these children, often above average intelligence, progress was directly related to the manner in which the teacher presented the curriculum and classroom control systems which the teacher operated. Chris Kyriacou (1986) articulated the fundamental value

of personal relationships between the teacher and the child in the development of a successful learning process.

Teacher Stress

There is much evidence of high levels of occupational stress present in the teaching profession and a collective sense of demoralisation (Luthra, 1997). This can result in growing teacher anxiety, an ineffective school and the tendency for teachers to over-react to minor pupil behavioural problems. Teachers may also find it difficult to establish a positive teaching atmosphere and feel isolated from curriculum initiatives. Teachers generally feel less respected by the general public who perceive them as less dedicated and less professional, (Social Trends, 1988). Further, teachers are aware of the persistent erosion of their authority over children, diminishing salary and promotion prospects and the continuous demands upon them to implement a succession of national initiatives with little training and restricted resources’.

‘...is not only - perhaps not principally - a matter of pay... Many teachers complain of a lack of public appreciation and recognition; they feel that they have been blamed for all the faults of the educational system, and expected to implement a succession of initiatives for which resources and training are limited’. (I.A.C. Report, 1988)

Long term prospects for teachers are very worrying. Recruitment is diminishing and some areas and some subjects are becoming increasingly difficult to supply adequate cover (DES, 1989). There is some evidence to suggest that teachers are leaving the profession and some are using sick leave to maintain a stable self-image (Wedell, 1977). Irregular and inadequately supply cover entrenches the cycle of poor behaviour and underachievement in an ineffective school environment. There is also a tendency for expensive older heads of

department to be replaced by younger, cheaper teachers and to appoint more flexible 'generalist' teachers rather than specialists. This makes the staffing bill cheaper at the expense of experience, specialist knowledge and stability. It also has implications for promotion prospects. (I.A.C. Report, 1988)

Management Strategies

'For most schools positive action begins with the recognition that poor achievement cannot be attributed solely to factors outside the control of the school such as the home situation or government decisions'. (DES, 1989)

Significant improvements can be achieved by developing positive communication processes and an encouraging working atmosphere. A clear view of the school philosophy and curriculum policy is required and institutional change should be attempted as a corporate task involving teachers, parents and children (Mortimer, 1988). Underachievement is a complex interaction of negative influences but it is possible for the school to develop strategies to break the vicious cycle of disaffection, deprivation and underachievement. (DES, 1989)

Ofsted inspections have brought an external political perspective to school improvement:

A major aim of the new arrangements is proclaimed to be the improvement of schools.

(Gray and Wilcox, 1995)

The intention of the OFSTED process is to enable change - to identify strengths and weaknesses and to give direction to the schools strategy for planning, review and improvement:

The purpose of inspection is to identify strengths and weaknesses so that schools may improve the quality of education that they provide and raise the educational standards achieved by their pupils.

(OFSTED, 1995)

However, this process may be a significant additional stress and may be counter productive:

The issue of whether inspections do have such an effect is one of considerable significance.

(Gray and Wilcox, 1995)

It is interesting to speculate whether the implied 'threat' of league tables, weak teachers and the continuing opportunity of blame for diminishing standards are adding to the stress that many teachers seem to be enduring. Certainly, accountability and the eradication of incompetence are important issues but this should not be allowed to obscure the fact that positive strategies should be encouraged to enable improvement to occur. (Mortimer, 1988)

Chapter 3

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

Part I

The discussion of Research Aims and Methodology is divided into two chapters. The first part is broadly concerned with the methods employed to explore the research Aims 1, and is mainly quantitative test analysis, whilst the second part (Aims 2 and 3) refers to the methods used for involving teachers, children and parents to elicit their views and engage them in the action research.

Research Aims

In the light of the teacher comments concerning underachievement in the school and as a result of the literature review, the aims of the project came to be formulated as follows:

1. To develop a better understanding of the nature and degree of underachievement in this middle school through qualitative analysis of information about pupils principally from school records. Specific goals were:
 - a. to develop an operational definition of underachievement based on pupil scores on intelligence and achievement scores and formulated in such a way that it is easy for teachers to apply to existing records;
 - b. to use this definition to identify underachievers, describe a profile of the level of underachievement in the school as a whole and explore the reason for this;
 - c. to examine the relationship of underachievement to educational, medical and social variables;

- d. to explore the relationship of underachievement to classroom behaviour, using the Stott(1976) Social Adjustment Test, administered by teachers.
2. To develop a better understanding of underachievement within the school through the perspectives of teachers, children and parents, by sampling, comparing and evaluating their views and experiences.
 3. To implement a programme of action research in order to engage teachers, children and parents in a process of change through:
 - a. involving all school staff in discussion of the purposes and progress of the project;
 - b. identifying related teacher in-service training needs and delivering a programme in response to them;
 - c. the processes of eliciting the perspectives of teachers, children and parents and respecting their current positions.

Methods for Aim 1

The first task was to develop a database containing educational, social and medical records of the children. The variables were those which were already proscribed by the files from which the information was taken. The test results enabled an operational definition to be developed relating to the difference between potential (as measured on an intelligence test) and achievement (as measured on a reading test). Identified underachievers were then correlated with the social and medical variables in order to explore the relationship between underachievement and the influence of stressing events in the child's environment. The final

part of this section is concerned with the implementation of the Social Adjustment Inventory (Stott, 1976) in the 9+ year in order to correlate the resulting data with underachievement to explore the relationship between underachievement and classroom behaviour and the way in which personality and social adjustment are mediating factors.

The Development of the Database

The development of a computer database containing children's medical, social (non-confidential) and educational records began in 1979 as part of my professional responsibility as senior master; to simplify teacher access to educational records and to rationalise the various sources of information. The decision did not mean that there was no longer a need for 'hard' files because material of a confidential nature, objective analysis of children by previous teachers and examples of children's work still needed to be kept. However, the decision to develop a data file was intended to encourage teachers to use the records in diagnosing need as part of their armoury of resources concerning the child's educational development. Certainly, the difficulty of handling and using thirty or more bulky paper files had discouraged teachers from using the information that was available. The data file also restricted unauthorised access to children's records, by having some control of the use of files and having the option to code sensitive information.

A decision was made very early in the task to record only factual data as it was felt the quality and accuracy of much of the early 'objective' information was at best very questionable. By 1986 I was challenging the quality of teacher comments and initiated discussion as to why these comments were made and for what purposes they could be used. It was clear that unsubstantiated or vague comments concerning the child's apparent poor achievement or behaviour had little or no value in profiling the child's educational record but had more to do

with the relationship between the teacher and the child. It was also possible that teachers had recorded medical and social events obtained by hearsay. Evidently, the importance of records related to the accuracy and quality of the information they contained as well as the uses to which they could be put. However well-intentioned teachers were, the legal implications of recording many such comments had to be clearly understood and their usefulness questioned.

I was therefore careful to record on the database only information relating to test-scores, diagnostic procedures or confirmed events in the child's life. As far as the later research was concerned I was confident in the quality of the statistical educational records collected after 1979 but unsure of the accuracy of early social and medical information. I therefore decided to confine the correlation of these latter factors with achievement to the period post 1986 which I was confident was more reliable. The test data on the other hand could be used from 1979.

The database had implications for administrative and organisational use. Accurate lists could be produced quickly and statistical analysis facilitated. In conjunction with objective information from previous schools the database could also be used to plan the formation of classes in terms of balancing a spread of intellectual and emotional needs of the children:

‘The right degree of detail enables teachers to meet on commonly understood ground. Subjective assessment is valuable but it is the more revealing for being supported by objective data and actual level of performance’. (DES, 1975)

Educational profiles could also be produced quickly for those children who moved to other schools. Correlations could also be managed fairly simply by applying the Pearson Product Moment computer programmes.

The tests used were those administered in the middle school at 9+ over the period 1979-1994:

The NFER 'BD' Non-Verbal I.Q. Test

The Edinburgh Diagnostic Reading Test

and in order to establish that the results were enduring examples of underachievement it was possible to match them against the scores obtained at 7+. The numbers of children on file by 1994 available for evaluation were:

Boys	1,956
Girls	1,370
Total	3,326

Only enduring differences at 7+ and 9+ were used in the analysis. The 7+ tests were:

NRIT I.Q. Test

Edinburgh Reading Test

The 9+ scores were used for evaluation, but only when a child displayed a persistent underachievement (as identified by the operational definition) on both test occasions separated by two years. All 3,326 children were scanned.

For looking at the medical and social variables I used the school population 1993-1994 as this was one year I could be sure of 'accurate' data for these variables, having personally collected and verified the information.

Age	Girls	Boys	Total
9+	43	62	105
10+	39	53	92
11+	47	58	105
12+	45	50	95
Total Population	174	223	397

By 1994 the database contained complete test results for the school population at 7+ and 9+. This enabled the suspected 'creaming' at 9+ to be examined in detail and the definition of underachievement to be articulated in terms of the shortfall between potential (as shown by intelligence tests) and actual achievement (as shown by achievement tests). It was also possible to examine the range of results and the relationship of gender and early school attendance to achievement. Further, as the information referred to normative data, comparisons could be made between the school, and the total local and national populations. Of particular interest was the relationship between the school and local population. As both came from the same educational and social background it was reasonable to expect similar tendencies to be present in both populations.

The collection of data concerning the child's medical and social background provided indications of those children who may be educationally 'At Risk'. However, predicting future behaviour from environmental evidence should be treated with circumspection. Stereotyping children in this way runs the risk of influencing children's achievement through low teacher expectation.

Further, children vary widely in their response to stress. Articulating a process of cause and effect places a predictive burden on the data which is simply not justified. In spite of these reservations, such evidence can alert teachers to possible problems and enable them to prevent poor patterns of achievement from becoming entrenched:

‘Risk profiles are dangerous tools, but they help to sharpen teachers’ awareness of potential problems. Waiting until patterns are well established before taking any kind of remedial action may be too late. Our evidence suggests possibilities for preventative action early in the children’s educational careers before such patterns are set’. (DES, 1989)

The educational, medical and social variables were collected over the whole of the period 1979-1994 but were not considered reliable until 1986-1987 for a number of reasons:

1. The data was lacking in detail and was often opinion and hearsay rather than hard and confirmed fact.
2. I had no control over the way in which the data was collected and recorded.
3. The variables were not clearly articulated and so it was not always possible to say to which variable the recorded information referred.

By 1986 I was able to initiate collaborative discussions aimed at developing a corporate policy on the methods and principles underpinning accurate recording of information.

I therefore decided, in correlating these variables with underachievement, to look at the records for 1993-1994 which was the first year for which I felt I had ‘reliable’ records.

This surveyed a total population of 397 children with 174 Girls and 227 Boys. The variables were developed from the information recorded and from the literature review. As this information relied upon communication with parents and the support services it was probable that some information was withheld for a variety of reasons. (Some information may have been felt to be confidential, parents may not have wished sensitive material to be recorded,

etc). Therefore any correlation is very likely to represent the minimum representation of actuality.

Table 3.1 A File Example

BEEBUG DATE 30.3.94	MASTERFILE : Records 158	11	
	FIELD	DATA	FILENAME: L 7/8
1	SURNAME	OTHER	
2	INITIALS	A.N.	
3	D.O.B.	05.09.79	
4	SEX	B	
5	FORM	IF	
6	7+ IQ	109	
7	7 = RT	91	
8	9 = IQ	108	
9	9 = RT	93	
10	12 - IQ		
11	12 = RT		
12	A	f.h.	
13	B	l.n.	
14	C	r.s.u.	

The following files were coded and hidden in order to restrict unauthorised access:

A. Social		B. Medical		C. Educational	
d)	Divorced	l)	Birth Defect	r)	Stamented
e)	Single Parent	m)	Hospitalisation (+ 1 yr)	s)	Specific Learning Difficulty
f)	Remarried	n)	Continuing Treatment	t)	Second Language
g)	Criminal Conviction	o)	Deafness	u)	Travellers
h)	'At Risk' Register	p)	Speech Therapy	v)	Religious Exclusive
k)	Parental Death	q)	Partially Sighted	w)	Cultural

Later, the files were transferred to Apple Mac (Claris Database) for ease of handling and statistical analysis.

The recording of the stresses present in the child's life (Social, Medical or Educational) was achieved by numbering the individual items 1 to 17 and for the purposes of description, breaking this down into convenient groups:

0 - 6	Normal
7 - 12	Unsettled
13 - 19	Severe

This grouping, though somewhat arbitrary, also articulated the reasoning that whilst most, if not all children, have some stress in their lives, the level of stress relates to the number of separate influences they have to cope with. I am aware that other factors may be at work however, the severity of individual items, or the personal fluctuations in individual ability to cope with varying levels of stress. Also, particular cases would have a variety of levels of support and counselling. This measure cannot account for these influences, but may be used to alert the researcher to possible underachievement.

It should further, be possible to illuminate the relationship between underachievement as defined in the research and levels of anxiety as represented by the recorded events in the child's background.

An Operational Definition of Underachievement

The concept of underachievement was discussed in the Literature Review. For this study it is necessary to develop an operational definition which can be applied to the educational test results in the database in order to identify underachievers. This section describes the tests and procedures used.

Teacher comments concerning the achievement of children entering the school at 9+, had suggested that there was an awareness of a shortfall in expected pupil performance. The difficulty that teachers faced was to articulate the level of achievement that could reasonably be expected of individual children and the corollary of this, whether some children were performing as well as could reasonably be expected. At the most basic level we could postulate a theory of normal attainment for children of any given age. That is, any child that fell below the norm for the class was designated to be underachieving. This conception, though attractive to teachers in its simplicity, is essentially flawed. It relies on the basic assumption that all children are the same - but we know that children differ in both intellectual capacity and environment experiences. Therefore we should be prepared to temper our expectation of pupil performance in relationship to their individual abilities rather than to group norms.

When considering what underachievement is, it is helpful to look at the differences between potential and achievement of the individual child. Small differences are not important as results of all tests are error laden approximations of 'true' scores and are less than perfectly reliable.

The children should be viewed in relation to the average achievement of all pupils at the same aptitude level and considered to be under achieving if they seriously fall below that level.

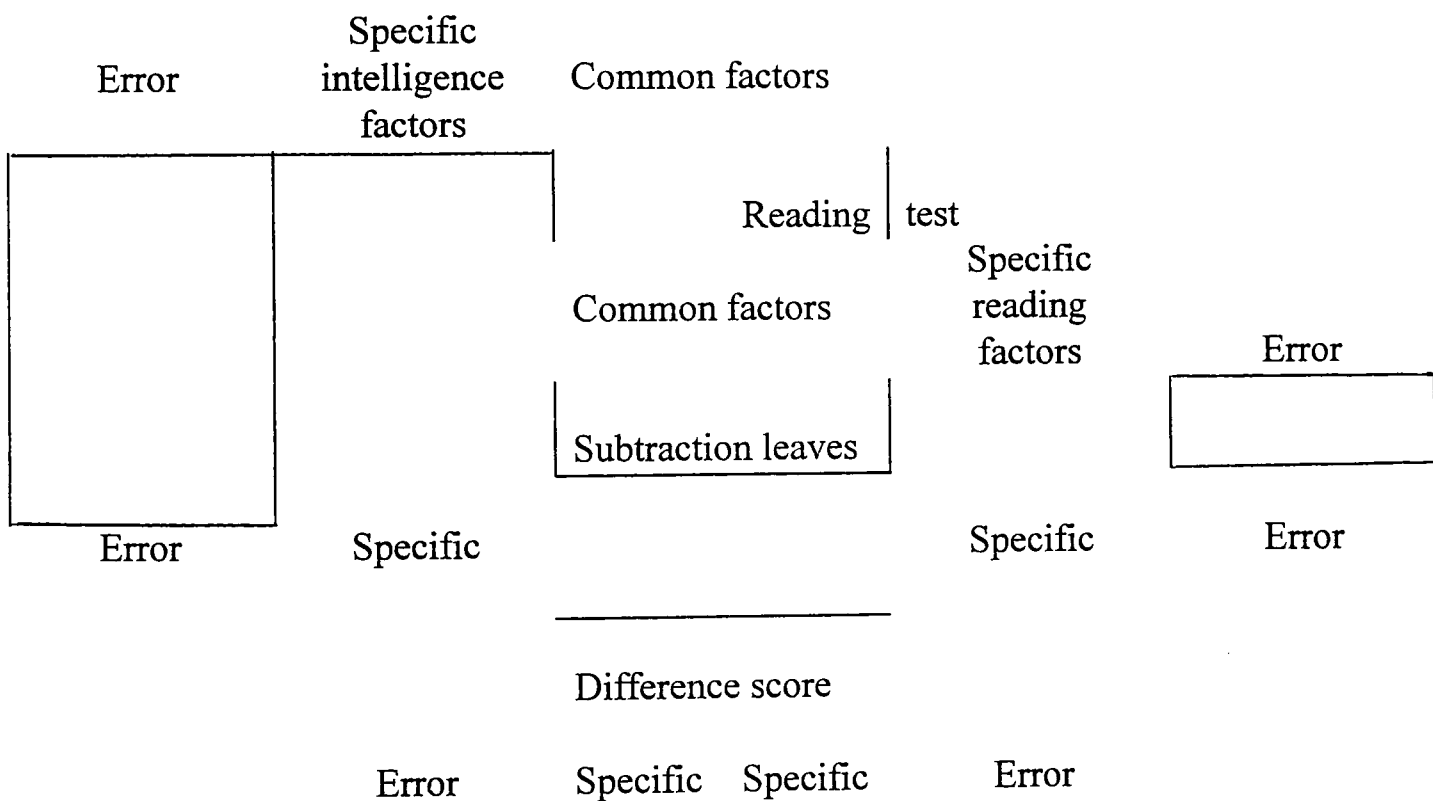
This concept has value in providing a way of alerting teachers to possible underachievement but these discrepancy scores need to be placed in their proper perspective.

There is abundant evidence, for instance, to demonstrate that test scores are depressed for children from poor family backgrounds (Singh, 1993). If we set a low expectancy for the child on the basis of low aptitude tests we are assuming that future performance will not change and we may be perpetuating the child's previous failure to learn effectively. The value of test data can also be affected on a single occasion by changes in the child's environment which influence their performance. Further, the results of all tests are error-laden approximations of true scores and even if the two test instruments have individually high reliabilities, the reliability when inter-correlated is likely to be substantially lower.

The issues concerned with social, cultural and environmental influences on test scores are ones which the teacher needs to be aware of when interpreting the results. If some groups under-perform equally on both tests of intelligence and achievement then this would drop out of difference scores. However, it would have wider implications for teacher expectation and

the development of relevant materials and teaching strategies. A more serious question is whether certain groups tend to under perform more on achievement tests. Whilst my formula cannot correct for this it at least demonstrates a discrepancy which should be investigated by teachers. Children will be defined as an underachiever for the purposes of this research if their score on a particular achievement test falls substantially below their score on a measure of intelligence. The difference in score will be calculated to be wide enough to be unlikely to have been caused by chance factors or measurement error. The criteria adopted (discussed later) is a difference of two units of standard deviation.

(Table 3.2) The Nature of a Difference Score



(From Thorndike, and Hagan, 1969)

The diagram represents an illustration of an intelligence test and a reading test. Each test is broken up into its component factors. The 'common factors' represents those general

intellectual abilities that are operating in both tests. The 'specific factors' are those abilities which appear only in the test to which they refer. The error represents the chance error of measurement. When the common factors are subtracted from the comparison we are left with chance error of measurement and those factors which are specific to the test to which they refer. These are the factors that determine the difference score.

Where the tests when applied were seen to be measuring exactly the same common factors only, the error of measurement would remain in the difference scores and would have an exactly zero reliability.

The reliability of the difference between an intelligence test and a reading test (expressed in standard scores) can be ascertained by applying:

$$r_{\text{diff}} = \frac{\sqrt{r_{11} + r_{22} - 2r_{12}}}{1 - r_{12}}$$

- This is where :
- r_{11} = the reliability of one measure
 - r_{22} = the reliability of the other measure
 - r_{12} = the correlation between the two measures

The Choice of Tests

I decided that a non-verbal test of ability would be one of the test instruments and that a diagnostic reading test would be the other. The decision to use a non-verbal test was deliberate. Though verbal and non-verbal tests have a substantial correlation - as they should if they are both conceived as measures of intellectual performance - yet it is possible that they are measuring different functions. One would assume that the verbal test would be a more

reliable predictor of performance in view of the heavily verbal nature of what is taught in schools. However, research suggests that for children with learning difficulties, for those under emotional stress and for those children with a meagre access to English, the non-verbal test provides a more accurate view of academic potential (Child, 1993).

The NFER (BD) Non-Verbal Intelligence Test is designed to give a measure of intelligence in the age range 8-11 years of age. The test was originally standardised in 1951 and re-standardised in 1955 and 1965. The test was given to a large sample of children - 14,650 children aged 8.01-9.00 and 16,737 aged 9.07-11.00 - in the spring and summer of 1965. The scores were normally distributed with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. The reliability co-efficient was established as 0.93 in the original test series and subsequently confirmed in 1955 and 1965 using the Kuder-Richardson formula (KR20). As I.Q. tests 'date' much less than performance tests and the high reliability remained stable during the re-standardisations, it was felt that the age of the test was not a weakness.

The Edinburgh Reading Test (Stage 3) was designed to provide a measure of competence over a range of reading skills in the age range 10.00 to 12.06. The standardisation of the test was based on 3,000 children in Scotland and 3,000 children in England and Wales. (Reduced to 2,865 and 2,793 respectively by absences). The test has a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. The reliability co-efficient was established in May 1981 and confirmed as 0.97 in September 1982 when a parallel test (also KR20) was administered to 300 children. The test is diagnostic and enables an individual profile of reading skills to be drawn. The inter-correlation of sub-tests is consistent and generally high indicating that a common core of reading abilities is being sampled by all the sub-tests. The test is designed to be

administered in two or three short periods with each part being divided into separately timed sub-tests. The tests are straightforward to administer and simple to mark and require no special psychological expertise in administration or in the interpretation of results. The total raw score is converted to a quotient by which it is possible to compare the individuals' performance to that of the population to which they belong. However, within each test the sub-tests measure the separate components of the overall reading ability with the intention of enabling comparisons to be made within the child's own performance. Consequently, specific strengths and weaknesses can be identified and matched as a process in profiling the child's reading ability.

The two tests were standardised using a large sample of children from varying social and cultural backgrounds and were therefore more likely to be representative of the national population. The tests chosen display high separate reliability. They are simple to administer and require little specialist knowledge to interpret. The manual of instructions are written clearly and with an economy of style which facilitates ease of application. There is a clear statement of the functions that the tests are designed to measure and clear instructions as to the test administration. The statistical sections contain evidence as to the test's reliability and the methods employed to establish norms and standardisation procedure. Evidence for the correlation of sub-scores and relationships with other factors are discussed. Scoring keys and instructions as to dealing with errors are included and marking is no more onerous than marking a set of books. Instructions for interpretation are clear and can be used without specialist knowledge or training. The reliabilities have remained stable over a decade. Fortunately, both tests are standardised on the same scale (mean = 100, S.D. = 15), which

means that actual scores could be used and the first steps towards identifying underachievers was to subtract Reading-scores from Intelligence-scores.

The next step was to decide how large a positive difference was needed to provide a reliable indication of substantial underachievement. Small differences could in any case be due to measurement error, since neither test is perfectly reliable. The relevant statistic is the standard error of measurement of the differences between the two test scores (Thorndike and Hagen, 1969 ; Anastasi, 1982) which is based on pooling the standard error of measurement of the separate tests:

$$SE = \frac{\sqrt{SE_1^2 + SE_2^2}}{M_1 \quad M_2}$$

The latter in turn is based on the standard deviation and reliability co-efficient of a test:

$$Sem = SE / 1 - r$$

Given reliability co-efficients of 0.93 and 0.97 and the same SD of 15, these equations yielded:

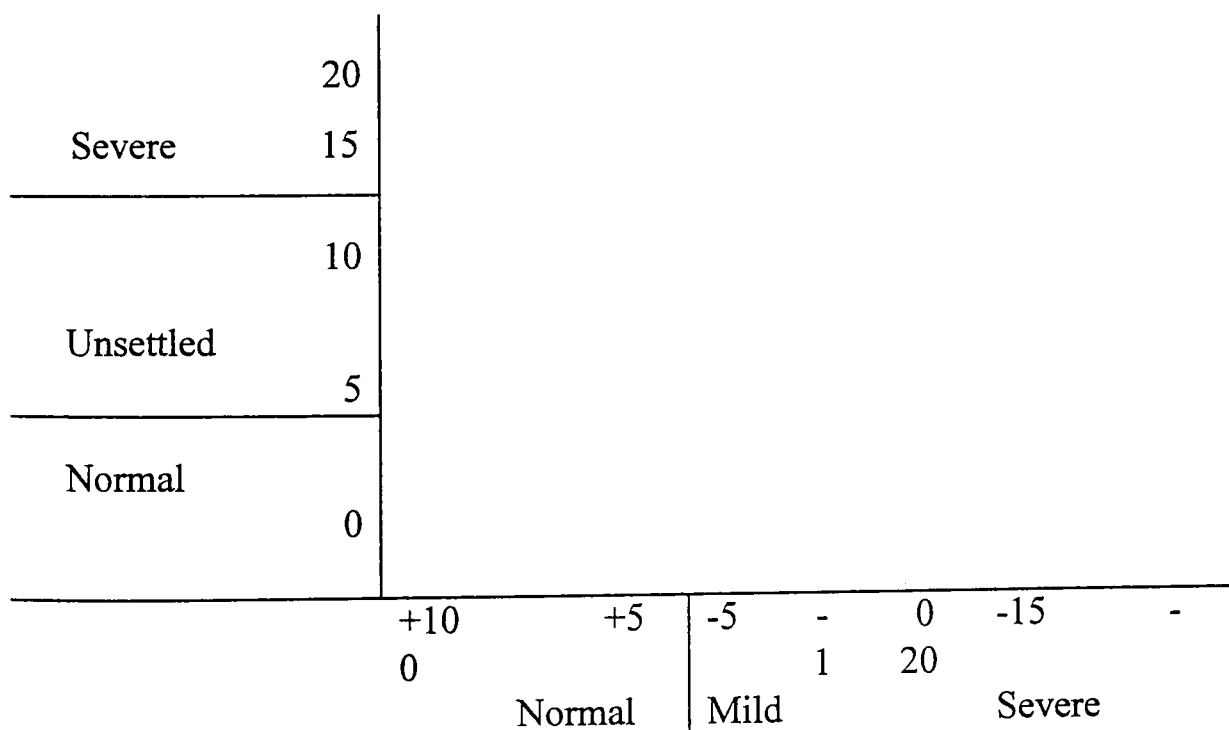
$$Sediff = 4.74$$

Under the normal curve of distribution about 32% of cases differ from the mean by more than one unit of standard deviation, or 16% differing in a positive direction. This means that there was a 1 in 7 (or more) chance that an apparent underachievement of 4.74 (or more) points difference was due to chance.

A bigger difference criterion was needed. A positive difference of 9.48 (two standard errors of measurement) is significant at $p < 0.025$ (1-tailed), or about 1 chance in 40. I therefore decided that a difference of 10 was sufficiently large and unlikely to be due to chance, so the operational definition of underachievement was taken as a score on the N.F.E.R. Non-Verbal Intelligence Test two or more standard errors of measurement higher than on the Edinburgh Reading Test. For the purposes of description the measure was divided in three categories +10 to -5 Normal, -5 to -10 Underachievers, -10 and above Severe Underachievers.

A further study relating underachievers identified by the preceding process to stress was attempted. By correlating the recorded stresses in the children's background against the measure of underachievement (Product Moment) it is possible to explore the relative influence of stress upon underachievement.

(Figure 3.3) Stress and Underachievement



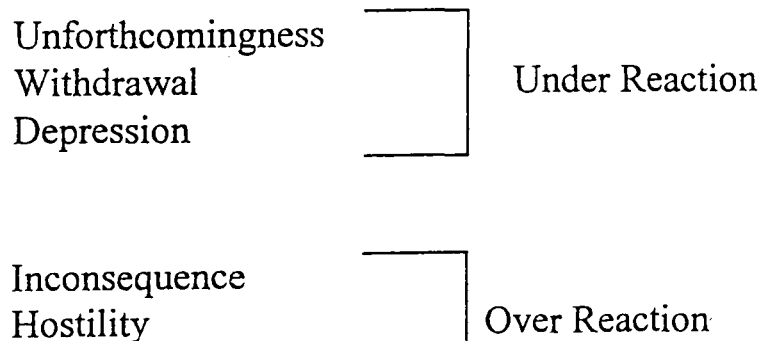
Underachievement

It should also be possible to compare gender differences.

A Behavioural Variable

The information obtained should be capable of correlating with the measure of underachievement to explore the relationship between underachievement and classroom behaviour. Further, I wished to involve the staff in a corporate learning situation which heightened their awareness of underachievement but was not time consuming or required lengthy training.

The Social Adjustment of Children behavioural test (Stott, 1989) was chosen as it could be applied to a wide age range, required little training, was easy to administer and simple to assess. Originally compiled in 1956 it had undergone constant validating studies involving large numbers of children and was used in the National Child Development Study in 1972. Internal reliability for the Ovract and Unract Scales was established at .82 and .90 respectively and were therefore considered consistent and reliable as measures of social adjustment. Only the OVRACT/UNRACT tests were used and the coefficients of reliability were calculated using the stratified Alpha method. There are five core syndromes that are tested:



With a further three associated variables.

Each variable is subdivided into a number of statements. The observer rings the items which refer to the child's behaviour and then adds them to achieve a total.

Stable	0 - 9
Unsettled	10 - 19
Maladjusted	20 +

There is no weighting for severity of individual items. In general, severity of reaction from the norm is related to the number of items ringed. The items had been chosen from descriptions commonly used by the teachers. There was consequently a degree of comfort with the terminology.

The test was chosen because it was felt as a result of numerous validating studies it was likely to correlate well with underachievement. These studies explored the relationship between the Social Adjustment of Children and some of the variables that I had identified through the literature review of influencing achievement

Validating Studies

Sociometric Status (Belfield, 1963);

Educational Attainment (Chazan, 1964);

Reading Attainment (Morris, 1959);

Cultural Bias (Stott, 1966);

Home Background (Carney, 1963);

Medical Disability (Stott, 1962).

Stewart (1962) had also used the Social Adjustment of Children(Stott,1962) to explore the relationship of intelligence, school achievement and social adjustment which was sufficiently close to my own research to suggest that the Social Adjustment of Children would correlate well. Further, there was a common variable identified through the literature, namely anxiety, which seemed to influence both behaviour and attainment. This and the preceding information, suggested that there may be a common core of variables that related to both social adjustment and underachievement.

Into the Classroom

The research looked at the behaviour of seven classes in the age range 9+, 10+, which constituted the whole population of years one and two, January - March 1996.

		Boys	Girls	Total
9+	Class 1	15	9	24
	Class 2	15	11	26
	Class 3	15	10	25
	Class 4	16	9	25
9+	Total	61	39	100
10+	Class 1	17	12	29
	Class 2	18	13	31
	Class 3	17	13	30
10+	Total	52	38	90
Whole Total		113	77	190

The total number of children researched was 190 with 4 children who were absent or who left the school. The number of staff involved directly was 9, which consisted of the seven form tutors, plus myself and the educational psychologist. The classes were chosen because I was teaching predominantly in those years and therefore had access to the children and the staff

without changes or modifications in the timetable having to take place. I was also able to take part in the year meetings which discussed the practical and theoretical problems of observing children and had access to minutes taken on these occasions. This also enabled individuals to discuss their difficulties and to match their experiences with other teachers which led to modifications in the research as it developed. The choice of age range was influenced by the researcher's decision to use those staff not involved in the research elsewhere and the practical desire of the total staff to be able to use the information obtained to develop modifying strategies.

In conjunction with the County Educational Psychologist the staff attended two training workshops designed to explain the methods by which the test should be administered, and to develop the skills of teacher-observer. The teacher then administered the test over the period of six weeks, supported by the Educational Psychologist.

During a normal teaching morning of an integrated day where the children were working with the minimum of teacher-intervention, the teacher observed the behaviour of the children. The teacher underlined the phrases on the test manual which applied to the child being assessed. The completion of the guide took approximately 15 minutes for each child but the teachers were instructed only to complete a small number on each occasion.

The teachers testified as to the difficulty of being objective in their observations of children within their own classes. They were aware of the problem of unconsciously modifying their assessment because of sympathy for the child - making allowances because of known social background. The teachers were also concerned that they might misunderstand the child's

actions or be not standard in the assessments in relationship to other staff. It was also believed that highly popular or poorly behaved children may be rated inconsistently because of the influence of relationships and personalities on the teacher's objectivity.

A number of strategies were discussed by the year groups as a result of these misgivings. One suggestion was to increase the number of observations which were made in order to reduce the possibility that what was observed was not influenced in these ways.

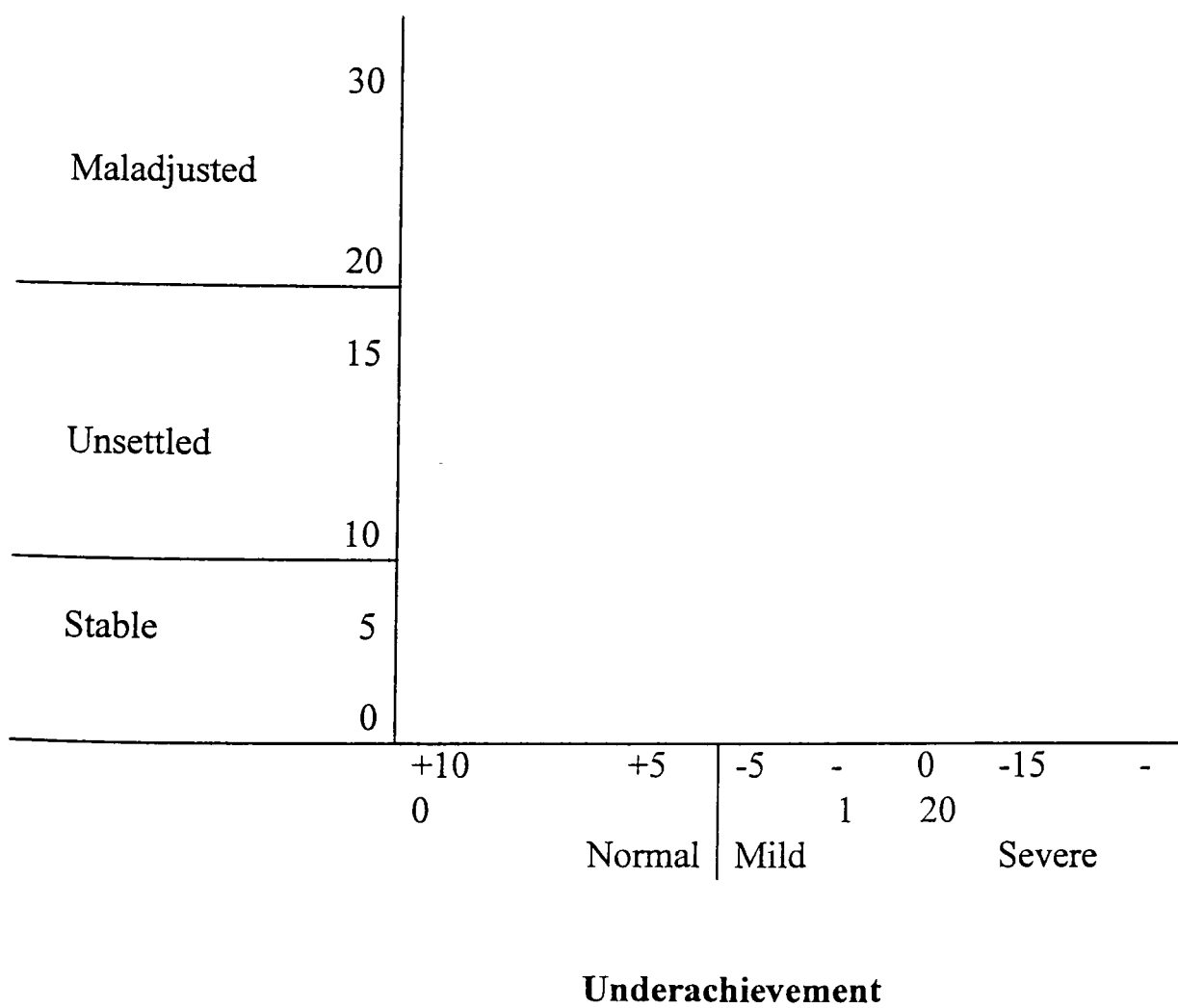
It was also suggested that observations should take into account the ways in which children's behaviour patterns varied during the day. There were quiet times when they were listening to a story or periods of boisterous group activity in music, drama or physical education which influenced the way in which children behaved in the following lessons. Samples of the children's behaviour taken at these times, the teachers asserted, would be unrepresentative of their behaviour in general. Further, the child's mood was observed to vary in relationship to external influences; level of fatigue, the time of day, the weather or hunger, to name but a few. Teachers agreed to make a series of observations at varying intervals and times of the day in order to minimise the influence of these variables but were reminded by the educational psychologist to keep in mind the developmental processes that might occur if the intervals between observations were too extended.

The 10+ group of teachers also suggested that one way of refining accuracy of observation would be to increase the number of observers. A number of different teachers observing the same child could come to an agreement about those behaviour patterns which seemed to be constants. Two overlapping practical suggestions were implemented. In open plan

classrooms and in team teaching situations teachers observed each others classes and discussed individual difficulties whilst the 'floating' observers of myself and the educational psychologist were used for 'second opinions'. These strategies were designed to improve the standard of judgement made by the observers and to develop maximum positive conditions for observation.

The data was analysed to show the level and distribution of social adjustment within the sample and was independent at this stage of the measure of underachievement. I then compared the two sets of data in order to correlate Behaviour and Underachievement (Product Moment).

(Figure 3.4) Behaviour and Underachievement



A further analysis should be possible to compare gender differences.

Chapter 4

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY *Part 2*

Perspectives of Teachers, Children and Parents: An Action Research Approach

Research Aims

This section is principally concerned with developing a better understanding of underachievement within the school by sampling, comparing and evaluating the views of parents, children and teachers. This will be accomplished by establishing a programme of action research in order to engage parents, children and teachers in a process of change.

To do this I intend to involve all staff in discussion of the purposes and progress of the project; identify and service related training needs and use the processes of the research to initiate change.

An Action Research Approach

There are various different definitions of Action Research, but the essentials as regards my study are quite clear. As 'action' it seeks to change or modify a situation, with the assumption that feedback from ongoing research, monitoring and evaluation can helpfully influence the evolving methods of interventions. As 'research', it is based on the assumption that intervening in a system and watching the effects is a good way of getting a better understanding of the processes at work - "throw a stone in a pool and watch the ripples".

The advantages of such an approach enables the researcher to tap 'insider' information and to use existing lines of communication, initiate home access to those concerned and develop

research strategies from already well developed relationships. This prevents the necessity of 'going in cold'.

There are however disadvantages to this approach. My role as researcher and as an ex-deputy headmaster may become so intertwined that it would be difficult to achieve a 'critical distance' on what is in part an evaluation of my own work. Further, my role as a teacher may make it difficult for the respondents (teachers, parents and pupils) to see me as neutral which would consequently affect their response. However, as I wished to sample the honest responses of teachers, parents and children it was felt that this was more likely to be achieved by building on existing and positive relationships. In this way I wished to go beyond the bounds of the quantitative research to research described in chapter 3, not only:

'What can be categorised or measured'. (Cohen and Manion, 1981)

This tendency to emphasise the overt; ignoring the context and concentrating on the measurable produced a danger that the research would become divorced from the social and temporal context in such a way that no account was taken of the participant's viewpoint or intention; only the observers interpretation would be considered relevant. I wished to illuminate the information discovered previously and to look at how, where and why underachievement occurred (Fraenkel and Wallen, 1994).

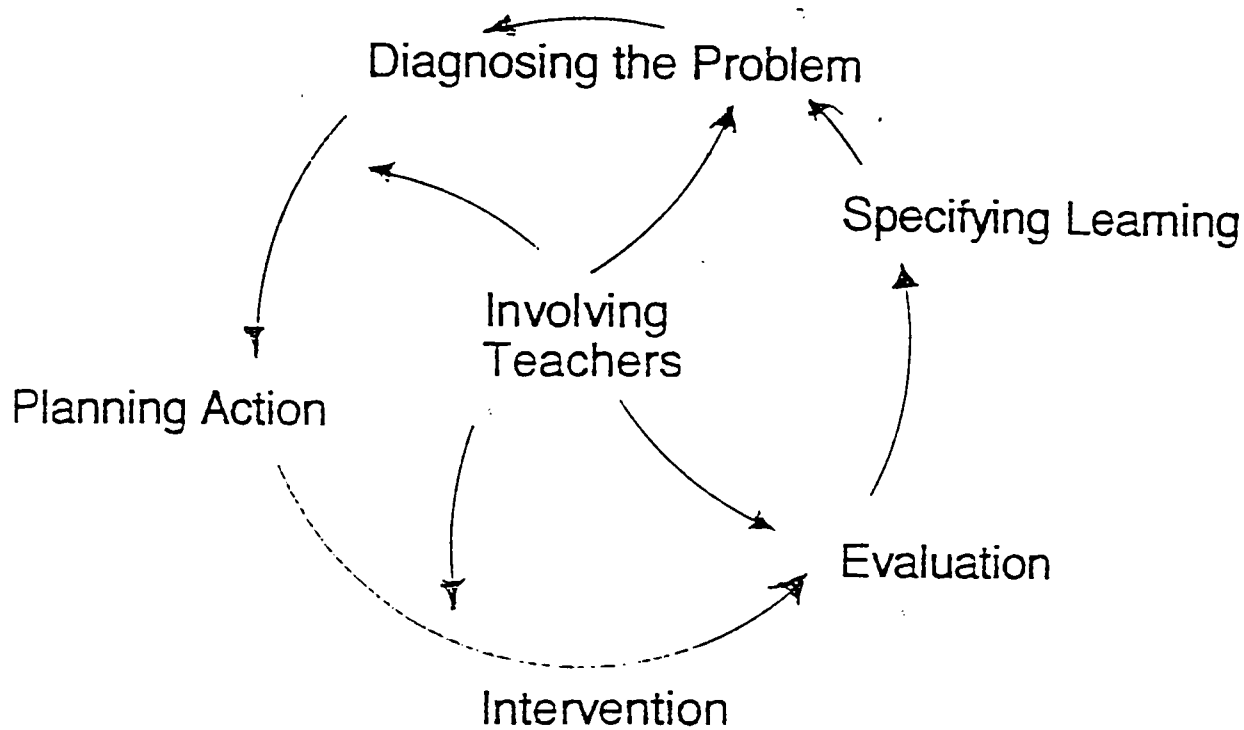
This meant that I wished to develop a programme of research described by Dave Ebbutt (1983). He writes that action research:

.....is about the systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their own practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions.

(Ebbutt, 1983)

Essentially, the research would involve:

(Figure 4.1 Planning Action Research)



and is concerned with looking at underachievement in the context of the home and the school.

It is also collaborative, to encourage those involved in the research to develop an 'ownership' of the study, to raise awareness about underachievement and to enable skills to be developed.

The researcher also intends to participate in the research in order to maximise the positive value of existing relationships and to encourage self-evaluation. Cohen and Manion (1992)

describe the process as:

Essentially an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation. This means that the step-by-step process is constantly monitored over varying periods of time and by varying mechanisms (questionnaires, diaries, interviews and case studies, for example, so that the ensuing feedback may be translated into modifications, adjustments, directional changes, redefinitions, as necessary, so as to bring about lasting benefit to the on-going process itself.

(Cohen and Manion, 1992)

In order to achieve these objectives, careful planning had to be take place and for this the action research planner, suggested by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) was useful (see Figure 4.2). Action research has implications for professional learning in schools (McGill and Beaty, 1992). It requires the participants to examine their practice, to be involved in collaborative self-improvement and to critically evaluate their own effectiveness. (Schon, 1993) Action research can also be accredited as part of a Cert Ed., Dip Ed. or M.A. (Education Studies) at De Montfort University and other universities and so individual interests can lead to further professional qualifications:

Most award - bearing courses internationally now recognise the validity of action research approaches, on the grounds that practical wisdom is an equally legitimate form of knowledge as the more theoretical forms.

(McNiff, 1995)

Given this model of research, it is possible to see how individuals can contribute to whole - school development; through organisational and curriculum appraisal, supporting professional development and by providing partnership opportunities for colleagues to improve their practice (Elliott, 1992).

This action research is therefore, not necessarily about studying a large number of cases, controlling variables, precise sampling techniques or of generalising findings to comparable situations (Cohen and Manion, 1992) but in illuminating the research outlined in chapter 3

and sampling the attitudes of the participants. To attempt to discover the “how” and “why” of underachievement and the ways in which parents, teachers and children influence it.

Animated Research

The rest of this chapter describes the methods adopted to sample the perspectives of teachers, children and parents about the causes of underachievement:

1. to obtain teachers’ views on underachievement and involve them in a process of school change;
2. to work with pupils in a way that could sample their views about learning;
3. to select four underachieving children for a case study approach that included interviewing parents for their perceptions.

Method 1

Children’s Perspective on Underachievement

‘Seeing the school from the pupil’s point of view is important for heads and teachers. Knowing what pupils see as positive helps them improve the atmosphere . . . This is a valuable source of management information’. (DES, 1989)

I was very keen to find out about the way in which children viewed underachievement. This section describes the method adopted. In summary, all the pupils from a number of classes were involved in a drama project, where they worked in small groups on identifying and expressing through role play what they considered encouraging or discouraging to the

learning process. The collective views of each team were recorded and these provided the data on the children's perspectives. The classes were mixed ability and mixed sex.

The fieldwork took the form of six one hour drama periods over weekly intervals for the half term autumn 1995.

I led the team for the introductory lesson to set the parameters within which the children were to work and for the final classroom lesson in order to record the research data using a common approach. The remaining four lessons were led by other members of staff from the teaching teams. The form of the lessons was that which the children were accustomed to working within:

Though the methodological approach is essentially a form of Action Research, utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods, the **process** and **organisation** of the research is designed to involve all participants in a sensitisation to the issues, the discussion of practical solutions and to find ways to implement positive intervention. This is as important as the actual research focus. For example, the use of existing management systems to gather data also encourages change to occur and as part of the process; school organisation, policy documents, resourcing and communication systems are scrutinised to effect change and to encourage school development. It can also influence related policy decisions on such issues as; discipline procedures, counselling strategies, bullying, school refusal and others.

Children, teachers and parents are encouraged to contribute on equal terms to the research and to feel that they have a personal responsibility to improve the school's and the individual's achievement. The participants can influence the direction of the research and, consequently, can develop a personal feeling of ownership.

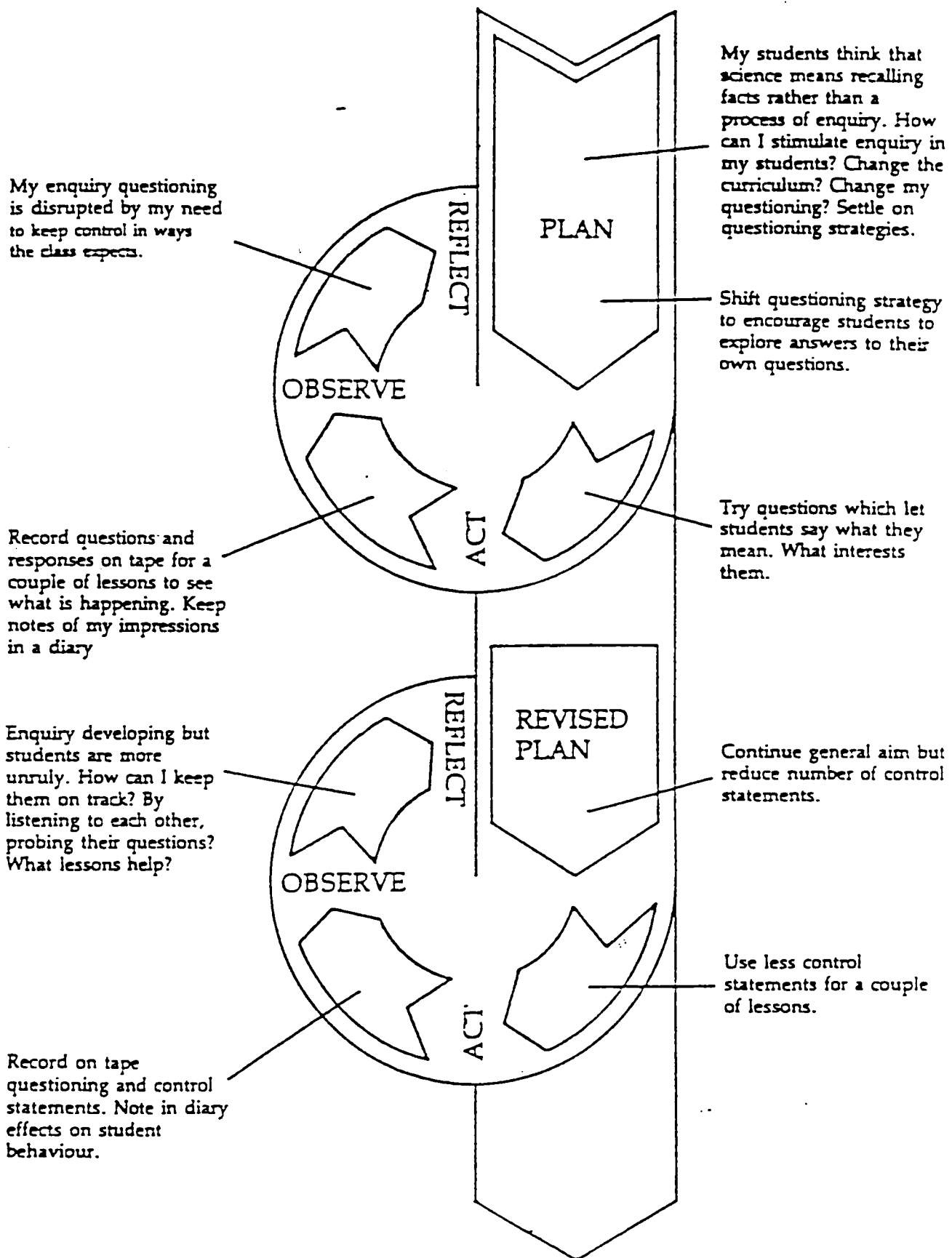
The children are treated as an important part of the school rather than failing and rejected misfits. Stress levels are diminished and confrontation avoided. School organisation can be used to provide counselling and discipline arranged to praise individual successes rather than to punish failure.

Parents are actively included in school decisions and the process advertises the school's positive approaches to education and improves communication by introducing a regular and qualitative forum for discussion.

The process also encourages the development of networks for teaching support, heightens the awareness of the issues, prevents the isolating effect of teaching stress and provides the opportunity for professional training. The teacher can be encouraged to feel that there are personal rewards for active participation. The can manifest themselves in individual publication, the production of individual or group conference papers or in accreditation for post-graduate courses.

For the research, this continuous feedback and analysis is a check on the reliability and validity of the findings and this coupled with the variety of data gathering techniques minimises the problem of bias often encountered in qualitative research. 'Animated' Research can be adapted to investigate and to provide solutions for any workplace situation because it is essentially a method of enabling both researcher and researched to work together to investigate, evaluate and to provide solutions to an identified problem. This lively interaction gives this methodological approach its name – 'Animated' Research.(282)

(Figure 4.2) A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO CLASSROOM RESEARCH
Kemmis S. and McTaggart, R. 1982



Introduction of the task

Teacher led class discussion

Group task-discussion-rehearsal

Performance to class

Pupil or Teacher led discussion and review

There were four open ended tasks chosen to represent the four main influences on children's underachievement as identified from the literature review - The Home, The School, The Child and The Teacher.

Week 1	My worst experience.
Week 2	How I would change the school.
Week 3	Getting my own way.
Week 4	Stopping out late.
Week 5	The children were encouraged to choose one of the previous four tasks to rehearse again in the light of later discussions and after viewing other groups' performances. Often children also wished to have time to develop their ideas further and to rehearse for inter-group performances and year group assemblies. They could also choose their own theme if they wished.
Week 5	Classroom based group recording.

The open-ended tasks were deliberately designed to encourage a variety of interpretations by the children and care was taken by the teacher leading the initial class discussion to act as an impartial chairman:

'In such cases the teacher is often leading with hints or suggestions as to the range of contributions being sought. Full and genuine discussion will take place when pupils are given more control over the course of the contributions and indeed when pupils begin to comment on each other's contributions. The teacher's skill in relaxing control over the nature and procedure of the discussion is important here'. (H.M.I., 1986)

In week six the children were taken to the classroom and after promising to guarantee that they would not miss their drama lesson they settled into their working groups. They were

asked to keep in mind the work accomplished by themselves and others during the previous four weeks and to appoint a recorder.

Task for Discussion:

‘What Discourages or Encourages my Learning?’

Organisation

Teacher led	Class discussion
Pupil led	Group discussion
	Recording
	Review to class by groups

Each group was encouraged to record all comments.

(Table 4.3) Groups Participating in the Research

No. of Groups	Year	Age	Class 1			Class 2			
			Boys	Girls	Total	No. of Groups	Boys	Girls	Total
5	1	9+	13	10	23	5	12	11	23
5	2	10+	14	10	24	5	14	12	26
5	3	11+	12	12	24	5	13	11	24
6	4	12+	15	14	29	6	16	12	28
21			54	46	100	21	55	46	101

Total number of boys	109	Number of staff	7
Total number of girls	92	in flexible teams of two or three	
Total number of children	201		
Total number of groups	42		

In the final session each child was asked to write their own list of answers to the question. One member of each group was designated to act as recorder and to collect on one sheet all the points that each group member had written. These were read out by each group leader to the class to initiate discussion. 42 sheets constituted the data for the children’s perceptions.

The question arises whether the scribes were conscientious in including all the opinions of the group or emphasised their own. Probably there was some bias but the reading out of the 'agreed' lists provided an opportunity for group objection and they would have in any case, through the groupwork, assimilated some of the views of their group.

An important point is that I observed underachievers actively involved in the whole process, articulate and, in three cases, actually leading the groups. I am confident that the process was at least moderately successful in eliciting the views of underachievers and including them in the recorded material. However, the responses precluded a comparison between underachievers and other pupils. Nevertheless, the group approach was justified on pedagogic and practical grounds.

Further, the group approach using the strengths of underachievers pre-empted the individual attitude of underachievers toward non-cooperation and disruption to normal classroom practices.

Coding the Responses

My first concern was to establish relevant categories of pupil response. Initially, I had intended to immerse myself in the responses and allow the coding to develop from the perceptions of the children. On reflection, however, it seemed to make more sense to use those categories originally identified in the literature review. In the final analysis the choice was something of a compromise with the major categories being those identified in the literature review and the sub-categories relating specifically to the pupil responses. It was a

concern to me that I might fall into the trap of developing a fieldwork design in order to prove a pre-determined research goal:

‘If we could be satisfied that classroom observers were interested in providing reasonably dispassionate information about classroom life and the teaching process then we could accommodate the difficulties attendant upon participant observation ... But this is not the case . . . they use their fieldwork experiences to promote their own research goals’. (McNamara, 1980)

It seemed to make sense to decide on a common approach to coding in order to facilitate later comparison.

I made no attempt to dismiss responses which seemed to be saying similar things. I could not be certain that similar perceptions did not in fact refer to different incidents and so it seemed more honest and accurate to code all responses. Where a sentence contained two or more clearly defined ideas they were coded separately, and where a response could not easily be coded I relied upon the child’s use of language and the stress laid upon the sentence construction.

The survey enabled an analysis to be made of the changes in attitudes and perceived importance of the variables that occurred over the four years of the Middle School. It did not enable individual children to be identified or for gender differences to be analysed as the data was generated by groups that were mixed sex and were a composite of responses. However, this guarantee of anonymity was designed to encourage the children to respond honestly and openly.

I was interested in comparing these responses with the perception of teachers (especially their lists of teacher behaviour which could influence pupil achievement). This required a common coding frame and so for analysis a set of categories was devised drawing on the various kinds of factors discussed in the Literature Review.

It would have been particularly interesting to learn the views of other children but the group approach conflicted with trying to get individual responses from identified children. It was certainly clear to me that this project should not work only with underachievers, which would have been labelling and probably ineffectual. The literature review and the work undertaken on the Stott(1976) Social Adjustment Inventory, suggested that the underachieving child may be unwilling to co-operate, unable to clarify ideas and unwilling to parade opinions for public scrutiny (Kerry, 1981). Further, the literature review suggested that academic failure often led to the underachieving child becoming isolated within the normal classroom where he was perceived as a liability in learning and behavioural terms by his peers (Hitchfield, 1973). This accorded with the comments of teachers within the school.

Often the underachieving child develops negative behaviour patterns to enable him to cope with his perceived failure and to support his self-image. In this way he is fulfilling the expectations of those in authority and achieving a personal status to bolster his lack of academic success. He may also become a negative role model for many of his peers (Kyriacou, 1986).

The profile of the underachieving child (see chapter 2, pages 32-33) suggests that gaining his co-operation may be a difficult undertaking. Further, investigative research based in the

classroom is seeking to utilise a set of parameters within which the underachieving child has already failed. The classroom situation has its own rules of behaviour concerned with acceptable movement, noise levels, relationships and discipline; sets of rules which the underachieving child perceives as relating to failure. The teacher may have also developed strategies for dealing with the disruptive underachiever in order to protect the integrity of the other children and therefore relationships within the formal framework of learning may already be strained with the very children with whom we wish to co-operate.

The research then, to create a positive foundation was visualised as being conducted on 'neutral' ground away from the classroom and designed to use the creative skills of the underachiever - oral dexterity, provocative questioning, responsiveness to open-ended questions and activities and when motivated, creative, persevering and inventive attitudes (Kerry, 1981).

I was also concerned about the effect of innovative classroom research upon the teacher. The close examination of one's professional performance is personally threatening, and change can be disruptive to control and order. It is perfectly reasonable that teachers should be concerned about this.

It seemed sensible to utilise organisation and working teams of teachers in order to develop positive teaching situations. Further, an oral or dramatic learning situation encouraged the positive aspects of the underachievers personality as illustrated on the profile. A further set of advantages accrued from the opportunity to base the research in the drama studio. This would enable some of the constricting rules of the classroom to be suspended. The children

were encouraged to become far more involved in the setting of targets, development of ideas and of review and assessment. Using the drama studio also allowed for higher levels of noise, permitted greater degrees of movement and encouraged the opportunity for underachievers to match and compare their experiences without risking judgement of censure.

Whitaker (1984) lists the value of such a research setting:

1. it (drama) creates a climate in which pupils can work with security and self confidence;
2. it facilitates the growth of understanding by offering the optimum opportunity for pupils to talk reflectively with each other;
3. it promotes a spirit of co-operation and mutual respect.

Team-teaching was already successfully established for drama and corporate responsibility for the learning environment was well developed. The teachers involved testified to feeling supported in all aspects of discipline, resource production and organisation. Team teaching also enabled teachers to create opportunities to observe and evaluate the influences of individual children and to concentrate their influence on small groups of children where appropriate.

Utilising existing teaching strategies and learning situations seemed to me to have positive advantages:

1. the children were accustomed to interacting with the teams and had formed a degree of trust in their motives;

2. the children were comfortable with groups of teachers and were not unduly concerned by changes in teaching teams or with the appearance of observers;
3. I had open access to the classroom;
4. the teachers viewed team teaching as a corporate learning experience and welcomed another pair of eyes to share the overview of the children's progress and to act as a reciprocal 'critical friend' concerning the assessment and analysis of teaching skills.

I wished to involve the children in exploring their own attitudes and perceptions towards underachievement but without suggesting responses by too narrow a question construct. The question posed was deliberately open-ended in order to encourage individual interpretation. This approach was also designed to elicit those responses that children found important in an attempt to sample a particular perspective on underachievement.

As a researcher I could pose the questions, respond to visual and verbal signals, share their environment and manage the context, but their experience was a matter only they could research:

This approach calls for a very different form of teacher-pupil relationship and classroom climate . . . the role of the teacher is to set up a learning experience which encourages the pupils to reflect upon their own feelings ideas and values.
(C. Kyriacou, 1986)

Method 2

Teachers' Perspectives on Underachievement

My intention was to engage teachers in a programme of action research which involved all the staff in discussion of the purposes and progress of the study. This involved the development of methods to focus the teacher's attention upon underachievement and to improve their observational skill. This also involved the identification and servicing of related in-service training as an important aspect of the research. This focusing of attention and the development of professional skills was an important precursor to eliciting the perspectives of teachers regarding underachievement.

Discussion during staff meetings articulated the growing realisation of a rising incidence of underachievement as demonstrated by test results and a seemingly concomitant problem of poor classroom behaviour. Teachers however felt powerless to initiate change and saw themselves as becoming increasingly isolated within the classroom. In collecting data for the research I was aware of the pressures that this would incur in terms of extra work, preparing lessons, developing resources and the increased demands upon teacher time. I was concerned therefore to develop a research paradigm which could be perceived as being rooted in the needs of the teacher and as being of practical value in terms of personal development. This decision led to the realisation that the research process itself had the potential for in-service training:

Research, therefore merges naturally with 'development', which can be defined as the rendering of the research into a form which will be of practical use to the teachers. (Nisbet, 1973)

It seemed to me that any new initiative could be designed to utilise and develop the collaborative learning strategies already in place and to build the research design into the timetable. This would have the effect of avoiding the interruption of teaching programmes, utilising existing information systems and focusing attention upon specific needs. In particular, the development of observational techniques enabled the teachers in the first year to focus on the academic and social behaviour of underachieving children and involved the element of training by utilising the skills of the county educational psychologist in developing observational techniques. The reading support unit was involved with the second and third year teams and provided a source of specific expertise whilst team teaching strategies throughout the school encouraged the teachers to be concerned with critical analysis and development of personal skills. I was concerned that the teachers should develop a professional 'ownership' in the research and be aware of the personal gain in terms of improved skills, that the research encouraged. In this way the research would not represent yet another imposed initiative that had little value for the teacher and was seen as demanding on time and energy. It would also be possible to make maximum use of the school as a provider of expertise for in-service training, which could be presented as a model for future initiatives.

In some ways it is difficult to isolate the component parts of the research. As it developed many of the separate initiatives become entwined, particularly in the way in which the various teacher groups discussed and minuted the study. In the next section I have attempted to show how the research involved the teacher but this is essentially false as the important feature is the totality of involvement.

Raising Awareness and Developing Professional Skills

In the research (described earlier) to elicit children's perceptions as to the causes of underachievement, the method employed involved the development of team strategies to observe and encourage dramatic role-play. This involved seven staff at weekly intervals over six weeks in the first half-term of autumn 1995. The task had the effect of focusing the teacher's attention upon underachievement, involving them in collaborative teaching styles and generating lively discussion through the year groups. This enabled them to suggest practical ways in which the administration and organisation of the groups could be modified in order to improve the children's performance feedback. In this way the teachers were encouraged to develop an 'ownership' in the research.

The Bristol Social Awareness Guides (Stott, 1989) was principally designed to obtain normative data for assessing the relationship between underachievement as defined and classroom behaviour. This is described fully in part 1 of the methods chapter. Briefly, it surveyed 190 children in the first and second years of the middle school and involved all seven classes of those years with nine members of staff. The research period was January - March 1996. The test has a place in this chapter too in that the preparation for the test was an introductory course of two weeks run by myself and the county educational psychologist and concerned with the methods of classroom observation, diagnosis and recording. In order to undertake regular evaluation and to facilitate the dissemination of findings to the rest of the staff, the year groups met regularly and kept minutes which I used as field notes to explain the progress of the research and made these available for other staff to read. They also appointed a team leader to report to the full staff meeting which met once a week. The

interaction between myself and the groups allowed for their ideas, practical suggestions and observations to modify the way in which the research was conducted. This focused attention on the children's behaviour.

The subject teams were asked to discuss the influences on underachievement with regard to their own subject. This focused the teacher's attention on the importance of specialists, curriculum development and resourcing. All fourteen staff, including the headmaster, were involved in this task. The teams took minutes which I used to maintain contact with the groups that I could not attend. The teams were further asked to identify ways in which strategies could be developed to initiate change. This took place in December 1995 and culminated in a survey question described later.

As a result of the increased awareness of behaviour problems and underachievement within the classroom, the teachers identified the need for in-service training. They were particularly concerned about identifying potential behavioural problems early and the methods and techniques by which children's poor behaviour might be modified. Two courses were developed by the county educational psychologist which were collaborative workshops based on the classroom:

1. behaviour modification which looked at observational techniques for early identification of behavioural problems and classroom teaching skills for effecting change.

2. teaching difficult children which sought to identify causation factors of poor behaviour and develop counselling strategies within the classroom and school.

All fourteen staff took part in these initiatives in the autumn term 1995 and discussed and minuted the courses in year group meetings. Two teachers attended the county course on Pastoral Care which was concerned with developing counselling skills. (January 1996)

The field study took the form of two survey questions:

1. What ways can the school curriculum have an influence upon underachievement?

At the end of a subject orientated task (described earlier) involving all staff (14) a question was posed and teachers invited to list their perceptions. No limit was placed on the number of responses.

The initial discussion was in groups and tasks had been set to look at:

- a) Resources
- b) Administration and organisation
- c) Curriculum development
- d) Teaching styles

e) Child response

and any further influences that they may identify. Each teacher filled out a sheet with their responses and these were used to provide data for the research. The initial task was group orientated but the final responses were asked to be individual in order to minimise bias introduced by group dynamics - where the most positive and strong characters may impose their ideas on others.

Number of responses		121
Number of teachers (December 1995)		14
Duration of task	-	one month
Number of group meetings		4

The coding of the responses was achieved by using a combination of factors in developing the frame:

1. using the variables suggested by the literature review;
2. matching, where possible, the variables used in the children's chapter in order to facilitate later comparison;
3. by allowing the responses to dictate the form of the coding frame.

2. What elements of teacher behaviour do you think would influence children's achievement?

At the end of the intensive period of training, observation, identification and recording the teachers were individually asked to complete a number of responses. There were no restrictions as to the number and the general rationale was the same as for the previous question.

Number of staff	14
Number of responses (November 1996)	196

(Table 4.4 Timescale of Research)

Children's perspectives (classroom task)	Autumn 1994
Behaviour modification (course)	September - October 1995
Teaching difficult children (course)	November - December 1995
Subject task (and survey)	December 1995
B.S.A.G., Observation schedule	January - March 1996
Counselling skills (county course)	January 1996
Behaviour survey (teachers)	November 1996

(Figure 4.5) Development of Research Initiatives

<u>County Ed. Psych.</u>	Year One	-----	Social Adjustment Guides	-----
	Year Two	-----	Behaviour Modification	-----
	Year Three			
	Year Four			

Reading Support Units

County Course - 'Pastoral Care'

By using the established system of staff meetings a record of the research process was provided through the minutes and an accessible procedure for dissemination organised. It

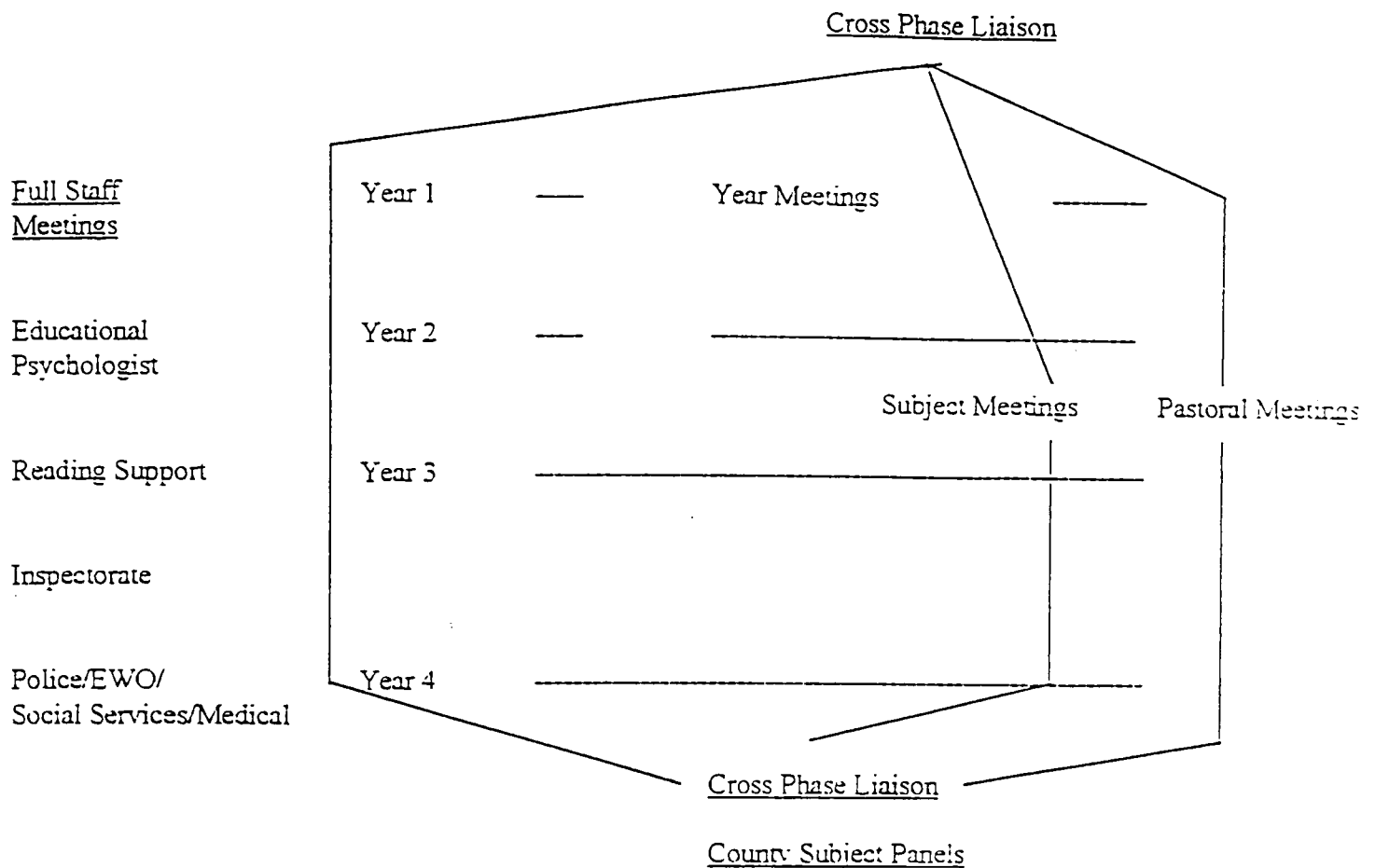
also minimised the necessity for increasing the number of meetings and built on existing group dynamics.

The staff of the four horizontal year groups were timetabled to meet during the school day once each week. These consisted of all the tutors in each year chaired by the co-ordinator. They met either in the staff room or in their year centre if it was vacant. The meetings were minuted and the records displayed in the staff room. These four groups were the most actively involved in the research as they were small dynamic, close to the practical problems associated with underachieving children and stable units. The discussions of content and organisation were extremely stimulating and were related to individual age groups and minuted.

The vertical subject meetings involved the head of subject and one subject co-ordinator from each year. These teams met monthly or more frequently as required. Similarly the pastoral meetings under the chairmanship of the Deputy Head (Pastoral) met monthly and consisted of the year co-ordinators and form tutors. The members of these two groups reported back to their year meetings where the discussion was minuted. The meetings concentrated principally on subject and behavioural issues related to underachievement.

Finally, the full staff meeting met each Monday from 4 o'clock to 5 o'clock under the chairmanship of the Headmaster and minuted by the school secretary. Minutes were typed and circulated the following day and a file developed for display in the staff room. This constituted a record of the research process and was the source from which many positive suggestions emanated, which were used to modify the method of dissemination.

(Figure 4.6) Patterns of Staff Meetings



Method 3

Case Studies of Underachieving Children Including Parental Views

Case studies are a traditional method by which teachers attempt to diagnose children's performance and general school adjustment. They are an attempt to integrate information from a variety of sources in order to understand the particular problems facing a child.

I wanted to observe more closely a few cases of children who were underachieving and so developed four case studies in the hope that they would throw further light on the causes or processes of underachievement. To contain the scope of this I relied largely on existing sources:

1. School records
2. Teacher's notes
3. Reports on progress
4. Test results
5. Report from professionals or agencies outside the school

This latter source is discussed in Chapter 1 with regard to my misgivings about ethical concerns.

An additional piece of fieldwork was undertaken, however, by interviewing the parents in order to obtain their perceptions of their child's underachievement. Of course there is no reason to expect that these four views are representative of all parents of underachievers; a suitable sample goes beyond what I could tackle for this study, but there may still be general factors that could be related to the whole picture of underachievement.

I was involved as part of my professional duties in on-going assessment and had developed a regular home visit programme to support and encourage the partnership between teacher and parent in the child's development. It seemed sensible to utilise existing positive relationships and pre-empt parental feelings of anxiety and conflict that were often the symptoms of early contact.

From the database, using the definition of underachievement described earlier (I.Q. minus reading test), a total of 59 current pupils were identified as underachievers and who were also on my list of home visits. For the purposes of the case studies I wanted to look at the diversity of reasons and situations. The list was therefore classified in four broad categories influenced by the literature review, and one child selected from each:

Type of Problem	Number of Children
Severe medical	12
Emotional or behavioural	18
Specific learning difficulties	14
A mixture of factors	15
Total	59

One child was selected at random from each category (using computer-generated random numbers) but then ensuring that the sample was gender fair and included one child for whom the home language was not English in order to reflect the ethnic variety of the school.

Access to the parents presented no difficulties. I deliberately decided against a formal approach by letter to prevent my being viewed by the parents as a representative of authority and so damage the relationship so painstakingly developed. In any case, at least one set of parents could not read English. I therefore decided to ask the parents during a regular visit if their views could be used as part of the research, and all agreed.

Initially I had intended to use a tape recorder and to make a transcript for a more detailed analysis of the parents' views, but this proved too daunting. Similarly, taking written notes during the interviews interfered with the 'normal' interaction that had developed between myself and the parents and began to inhibit the free exchange of ideas and alter the social relationship that had developed. The parents had begun to respect my motives and to trust my judgement and responded to my interest in their child - aspects of the communication process which were hard won and which I did not wish to put at risk.

There were eight interviews, two with each family, conducted at weekly intervals, and they took place for about one hour after school. As all the research families lived close to the school I decided to conduct the interviews and then return to the school in order to make notes immediately whilst the details were still fresh in my mind.

There were four broad areas of discussion which I kept referring to with a number of subsidiary questions available to find the area most relevant to the individual family.

1. *The Child's Environment*
 - a) Is the child healthy?
 - b) Does the child have many friends?
 - c) Does the child like going to school? Pocket money?
2. *The School*
 - a) What does the parent like about the school?
 - b) How often does the parent visit the school?
3. *Parental Attitudes*
 - a) What is the use of education? Is homework necessary?
4. *Effective Communication*
 - a) Do you understand the school system of giving information?
 - b) What do you see as problems?

The parents were asked to elaborate upon their concerns and worries and to suggest ways in which improvements could be made in order to encourage improvement in their child's achievement. All the parents were very willing to elaborate their concerns.

The interviews with the Asian family were conducted on their terms. The father received me as an honoured guest and, apart from greeting me on arrival, I saw no more of the mother except when she brought us refreshments. The daughter acted as interpreter but was discouraged from commenting by the father or from taking part personally in the interview.

Neither of the parents spoke English. However, the father's attitude was extremely positive and supportive to the difficulties experienced by his daughter.

Of the remaining three families, only one was conducted with both parents present. All, however, displayed an eagerness to discuss the problems experienced by their children and the influence that this had on the family. Much of what had happened had been frustrating and painful for the parents and they welcomed a genuine interest in the well-being of their children.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter deals with the analysis of information about pupils obtained mainly from school records and is intended to develop a better understanding of the nature and extent of underachievement in this middle school by:

1. comparing the 9+ school intake with local and national populations by using the normative data obtained from I.Q. and Achievement tests administered at 7+ and 9+;
2. developing an operational definition of research in order to describe the levels and causes of underachievement in the school;
3. examining the relationship of developmental, medical and social stresses to underachievement;
4. exploring the relationship between behaviour and underachievement.

Comparison of Populations

An examination of the numbers of children entering the school at 9+ reveals a considerable shortfall in the 9+ population caused by children allocated places but not taking them up. In 1979 this loss was about 20% of the total intake but rose to 36% by 1988. This trend also coincides with a steady population fall of the 9+ intake such that the school roll fell from 500+ in 1979 to 292 in 1988. Further, throughout this period there was a transient movement each year of 13% of children entering or leaving the school between the ages of 9-13. In

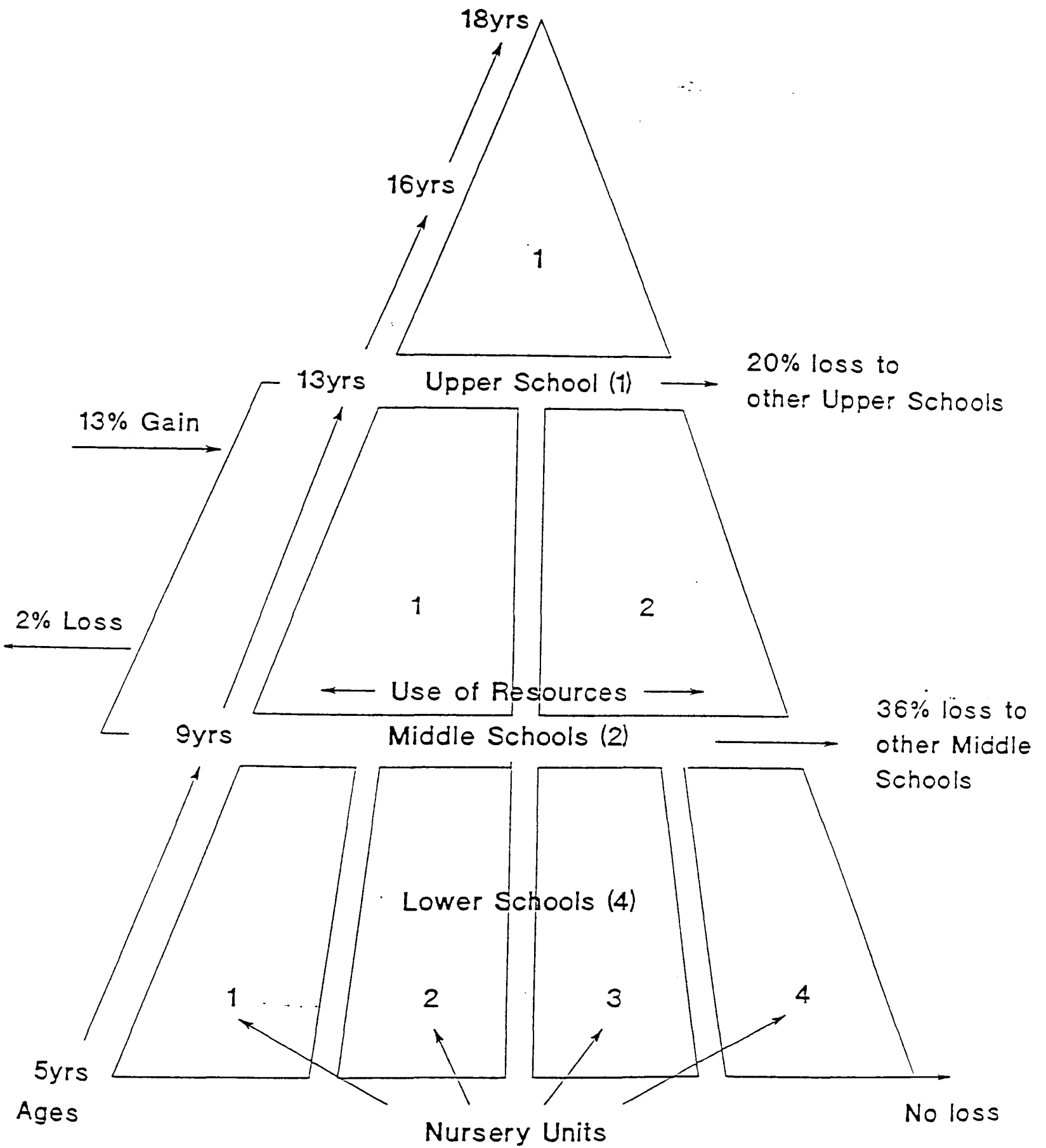
practical terms this meant a loss of five classes over the period examined and movement of one class during the middle years.

The fall in school population is erratic year by year and causes a number of organisational anomalies. In the school year 1986-87 for instance, the school population consisted of 223 boys and 174 girls unevenly distributed over the four middle school years. This resulted in two classes being constituted of a 2:1 ration of boys to girls and all classes having more boys than girls. Further, the class sizes varied from 22 to 35 children. This had implications for resourcing and organising mixed ability classes.

The transient school population (those children who entered or left the school during the middle school years) represented 37 children in 1987-88. The majority of the children, thirty-one, had suffered serious social and behavioural problems and nine stayed at the school for less than one term before moving on, which contributed to general instability. In five cases, the children had been suspended from other school for serious behavioural disorders. The six children who had entered the school at 9+ but left during the middle school years did so predominantly because their fathers found work out of the area. Five of these were average to above average students.

The consequence of this movement is a gradual accumulation of children with educational, social and behavioural problems which constitute a larger percentage of the school population as the total intake falls. This is exacerbated by the gradual loss of more able children during the middle school years.

(Figure 5.1) School Population Movement 1986-87



The school also attracted local initiatives for special educational needs:

1. a second language unit.

Three Vietnamese children;

2. a 'travellers' unit.

Five children;

3. religious exclusive children.

Five children for whom special curriculum provision had to be made.

It is ironic that the positive attempts made by the staff to improve curriculum access to deprived children seems to have been a factor in devaluing the school in the eyes of the parents of able children. Further, the success at dealing with 'difficult' children tended to attract more of these children from other schools and deter the more able.

Comparison of I.Q. and Attainment Tests

By analysing the distribution of intelligence and attainment of the school intake it is also possible to compare the school intake with the total 9+ local population. This is to ascertain whether the school represents a reflection of general local intelligence and attainment and how this compares with the national norms. The tests used are the 7+ screening tests and the 9+ tests over the period 1979-1987 involving a total of 3326 children. (see page 122).

The average over this period for the intelligence tests display similar levels between the school, local and national norms. There are no significant differences and the results are within the acceptable norms as defined by the tests reliability. However, it is noticeable that

the local population is consistently below the national norms and the school is further below the results obtained for the total local 9+ population. These differences though small, are significant enough for comment and further examination as this may reveal differences in the distribution of scores.

The local 9+ population has markedly fewer children achieving quotients in excess of 116 when compared to national norms and the majority of the children are clustered around the average. Having taken into account the stability of the results by demonstrating the constancy at 7+ and 9+ I am led to conclude that the depression of the local distribution of scores may be related to social and cultural variables:

There is abundant evidence that intelligence test performance is influenced by general cultural background... Studies repeatedly show lower test performance for children from lower socio-economic groups (Thorndike and Hagen, 1969).

The school intake is even more anomalous. 79% of the children are clustered around the average with only 5% above 116 and 16% below 85.

The reading test results over the same period came as something of a surprise. The empirical observations of teachers have recognised for some time that the 9+ intake are achieving at a much lower level than might reasonably be expected in relation to their tested intelligence. It was considered that this was a phenomenon of the total local 9+ population and that it was related to socio-economic deprivation. This is not so. The averages of the school 9+ intake over the whole period are consistently one standard deviation below those of the total local population. Further, an examination of the distribution of scores reveals that high achievers

(Table 5.2) Results of 7+ Screening (Autumn 1984)

(Relates of 9+ School Intake 1986-87)

Non-Readers Intelligence Test

Quotients	Total Age group	Went elsewhere	Research School	Sister School	Normal Distribution
116 and above	8.4%	16.5%	5.0%	6.5%	16
101 - 115	40.0%	49.0%	40.0%	33.0%	34
86 - 100	37.0%	21.0%	39.0%	49.0%	34
85 and below	14.0%	13.5%	16.0%	11.5%	16
Total (Numbers)	224	61	83	80	

SPAR Reading Test

Quotients	Total Age group	Went elsewhere	Research School	Sister School	Normal Distribution
116 and above	12.0%	23.0%	8.0%	9.5%	16
101 - 115	34.0%	41.0%	29.0%	32.5%	34
86 - 100	38.0%	25.0%	40.0%	47.0%	34
85 and below	15.0%	11.0%	23.0%	11.0%	16
Total (Numbers)					

SPAR Spelling Test

Quotients	Total Age group	Went elsewhere	Research School	Sister School	Normal Distribution
116 and above	15.0%	30.0%	6.0%	13.0%	16
101 - 115	31.0%	33.0%	31.0%	30.0%	34
86 - 100	33.0%	26.0%	34.0%	37.0%	34
85 and below	20.0%	11.0%	29.0%	20.0%	16
Total (Numbers)					

are 4% lower in the school and the low achievers 8% higher than in the local population.

Further, an examination of the distribution of scores reveals that high achievers are 4% lower

in the school and the low achievers 8% higher than in the local population. This means that

few classes have an even distribution of intelligence and achievement and most classes have

large numbers of children with reading difficulties. The result of this has implications for resources and teacher expectation.

(Table 5.3) (Intake) 9+ Reading Test Scores 1983-1986

(number of children)

	1983	1984	1985	1986	
70	4	5	5	5	
71 - 80	12	19	7	12	
81 - 90	30	38	20	33	
91 - 100	34	80	25	87	26 58 29 79
101 - 110	11	9	20	18	National Average
111 - 120	2	3	7	5	
120 +	0	13	1	13	4 31 1 24

The graph of distribution is negatively skewed, with the greatest number of children achieving below average in relationship to the whole national population.

Relationship between recorded stresses and achievement

The next section looks at the relationship between underachievement and recorded problems. As I had been suspicious of the accuracy of earlier information regarding the recording of medical, environmental and learning difficulties I decided to use the whole school population of 1986-87. This was the first year I was confident of the accuracy of the recorded information I will look at levels and distribution of overachievement and underachievement in this population and also at gender differences, if any.

School Population 1986-87

Boys	223
Girls	174
All	397

Definition of underachievement

By using the I.Q. test as a measure of potential and the reading test as a measure of actual achievement, I formulated a measure of underachievement as being the difference between the two tests. This was measured in standard units (I.Q. minus reading test).

4.74 standard units is defined as underachievement, but for the purposes of analysis 9.48 units is used as this has a low probability of occurring by chance (1 in 20). Severe underachievement is defined as 14.22 standard units. These are rounded to 5, 10 and 15 units in the analysis and represent 1, 2 and 3 standard errors of measurement. This measure of underachievement is applied to the whole school population of 1986-87.

(Table 5.6) Underachievement: School Population 1986-87

I.Q.-	Reading Difference	No.	%	
+5	+10	5	1	
0 -	+5	42	11	
-5	0	180	45	
-10 -	-5	88	22	Underachievers
-15 -	-10	67	17	Severe Under-
-10 -	-15	15	4	achievers
		397	100	

170 out of 397 children, or 43% are classified as underachieving whilst 21% of the total population are classified as severely underachieving. Both these levels are very high. A high % of underachievers are above average I.Q. This is partly due to the 'floor' effect where it becomes increasingly difficult to score a large difference between I.Q. and reading as the I.Q. measure falls below 100. What is disturbing is that all of the severe category are average to above average I.Q. This had implications for school expectation and achievement. The 'floor' effect had the coincidental effect of discriminating between underachievers and true 'slow' learners.

There is no significant difference between boys and girls in the non-underachieving or underachieving groups.

$$X^2 = 1.05 \quad N.S.$$

Relationship between underachievement and social, medical and development factors

The number of recorded factors will be counted for each child on a scale of 0-17. These factors relate to the known stresses in the child's life and are recorded on the database.

Factors Recorded

- | | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Divorced | 7. Birth defect | 13. Stamented |
| 2. Single parent | 8. Hospitalisation | 14. Specific learning Difficulties |
| 3. Remarried | 9. Continuous Treatment | 15. Second language |
| 4. Criminal Conviction | 10. Deafness | 16. Travellers |
| 5. 'At Risk' register | 11. Speech therapy | 17. Religious exclusive |
| 6. Parental death | 12. Partially sighted | 18. Sibling Death |

The factors relate to the common coding frame developed from the literature review in order to compare the perceived influences on underachievement. The count is broken down into units for convenience of description.

Social, Medical, Development Factors

0	5	10	15	20
Normal (0 - 6)		Mild (7 - 12)		Severe (13 - 19)

This relies on the principal that most children have some stress in their lives but that the level of stress is related to the number of factors they are enduring. This may also be influenced by personality factors and the social support they receive from others.

The measure of underachievement (I.Q. minus reading test) reflected in standard units, will be correlated with recorded factors to explore the relationship between underachievement and the levels of stress endured by the child as represented by known Medical, Social and Development problems (Product Moment).

For all pupils (397) there is a correlation of +.50 between the degree of underachievement and the number of recorded problems. This is positive and significant but not very strong.

A more detailed examination shows that among children achieving their potential, or slightly 'overachieving', the correlation is only +.21. This shows no strong relationship in the 'normal' group. However, among underachievers in a broad sense of difference of at least 5 standard units (I.Q. minus Reading) there is a strong relationship of +.75. The correlation strengthens in relationship to the severity of the underachievement.

(Table 5.7) Correlation of Social Factors With Underachievement

Correlation	+.21	+.71	+.75	+.79
(With Recorded Factors				
Underachievement	+ to - 5	-5 to -10	-10 to -15	< -15
(Standard Units)				
	Not	Mild	Severe	
	Underachievers			

Though the difference is small between mild and severe underachievement, taken with the correlation for those children by this measure not underachieving, there seems to be a trend

of increasing relationship with recorded problems the more severe the underachievement. There is also no significant gender difference.

An analysis of the -5 to +10 (non-underachievers) children's records (numbering 227) reveals a marked difference in the major variables which seem to be influencing achievement. Whilst they are similar to those which seem to relate to underachievement there are a number of important differences. The correlation between environmental factors and achievement is much lower suggesting other factors like social stability, positive self esteem, personality and early identification and active support for difficulties may be important here.

Recorded Factors for Non-Underachievers

Second Language	Medical	Specific Learning Difficulties	Divorce/Remarriage
21 %	29 %	40 %	10 %

% of recorded factors -5 to +10

These variables are more likely to be characterised by a qualitative diagnosis, accurate recording, external support and individual learning schemes.

Certainly, these categories are more likely to demonstrate positive common factors than those relating to underachievers:

1. Early identification of the child's difficulties.
2. Positive and regular parental interest and support for the child.
3. The development of regular and personal communication between the parent and the school.

4. The identification of one teacher to whom both parents and child can relate and who supply help, advice and support.
5. Detailed and qualitative school records.
6. Individual support through Reading Support Unit, Multicultural Service and the Educational Psychologist.
7. The production of individualised learning packages and regular assessment.
8. A personal interest in the child and their difficulties by the teacher.
9. Detailed and qualitative communication with external agencies.
10. A positive and responsive attitude by the child.

An Examination of Variables in Underachievement

This analysis refers to the 170 identified underachievers in the total school population of 397 for the school year 1986-87.

Medical

28% of underachievers have experienced long term medical problems where one or more years of educational have been lost through hospitalisation, or where long term treatment is required. In conjunction with other medical problems 40 children have received early treatment for deafness and speech disorders. It is significant that this treatment occurred during the initial teaching of reading and can be an important factor in later reading disability. Whilst early respiratory related symptoms tend to disappear during growth, later diagnosis can be obscured and make poor reading habits difficult to eradicate.

Inability to differentiate and reproduce similar sounds or to have difficulty in hearing from certain directions are simple examples of these problems especially if taught reading solely through the 'phonic' method.

Six children have records of difficult births which were confirmed by their parents. Three of these have related minor brain damage which resulted in specific learning difficulties. This is characterised by poor hand-eye coordination, cross-lateralism and the difficulty of cerebral data processing. Two children had records of head injuries as a baby. Those children suffering from medical conditions such as hydrocephalus, diabetes, epilepsy often suffer from mood changes and problems of concentration. These children (numbering 5) were generally well documented and supported by qualitative medical information. Efficient and regular communication are also features of this variable.

Only 11% of the total school population have medical histories or records of prolonged hospitalisation. Underachievers seem to be 2½ times more likely to be suffering from ill-health than the general school population. This may relate to social, psychological reasons rather than to genuine poor health.

Specific Learning Difficulties

8% of underachievers have been diagnosed as having specific learning difficulties; first being referred by teachers, then assessed by the County Educational Psychologist. These children receive individual attention in terms of teaching time and resources. However, referral requires the consent of the parent and 10% of the parents of underachieving children refuse to cooperate. A number of constraints seem to be operating when this occurs:

1. The parent does not wish the child to be labelled as 'different'.
2. The parent perceives the method and style of communication as daunting.
3. The parent feels guilt or shame because of the child's failure.
4. There is a misconception as to what educational assessment means. There is a fear that the child will be taken away from home.

In all cases early diagnosis and easy access to external sources of information coupled with positive lines of communication with the parents minimised this problem. However, these children are often referred as a result of poor behaviour - when the child's frustration is manifest in anti-social violence, moods or isolation.

Unless good relationships have been developed with the parents, the stress is compounded by recriminations and loss of parental cooperation. In three cases the families are also severely under stress as the result of social problems. The 10% of children not referred as a result of parental refusal are in the severest group of Underachievers.

The 'Travellers' Unit

3% of underachievers (all eleven children in this unit) are in this group. They receive specialist help both as support within the classroom and on a withdrawal basis. Most of these children are caught in a cycle of deprivation almost impossible to break. They have lost up to half of their schooling by the time they reach the middle school. As a consequence they are unable to compete educationally with their peers and have not developed social and cooperative learning skills. They are often isolates within the mainstream classroom. Truancy and anti-social activities figure highly in this group and improvement is a long-term

aim. The support teacher developed a community strategy to visit the homes regularly and to meet and support the parents through social activities. Her genuine interest and care for the specific problems of travellers minimises the stress that dealing with authority produces in this group, but parental attitudes to the school are ambiguous and adult illiteracy is common. The children require careful and systematic diagnosis leading to individual programmes of study and continuous informal assessment. Progress is confounded by infrequent attendance by three of the children.

Second Language

4% of underachievers were children for whom their home language is not English. This represents 64% of the total second language learners in the school population. The second language concept as a variable in underachievement is a common one in the research literature but is fraught with complexity. Both the I.Q. instrument as well as the reading test may be influenced through cultural bias. Further, it is common to describe all 'second language' children in the same terms, making no distinction between the linguistic requirements of a wide variety of languages, the disparate parental attitudes to education and the variety of cultural backgrounds. The children respond individually quite differently to the learning situation, as a result of their own motivation and the support and encouragement of their parents. Improvement seems to relate to the educational and class level of the parents within their own culture. Immigrants from middle class backgrounds and literate in their own language seem to have higher aspirations for their children and to actively encourage them to achieve well. Children whose parents originate from poorer beginnings are handicapped by a variety of further factors:

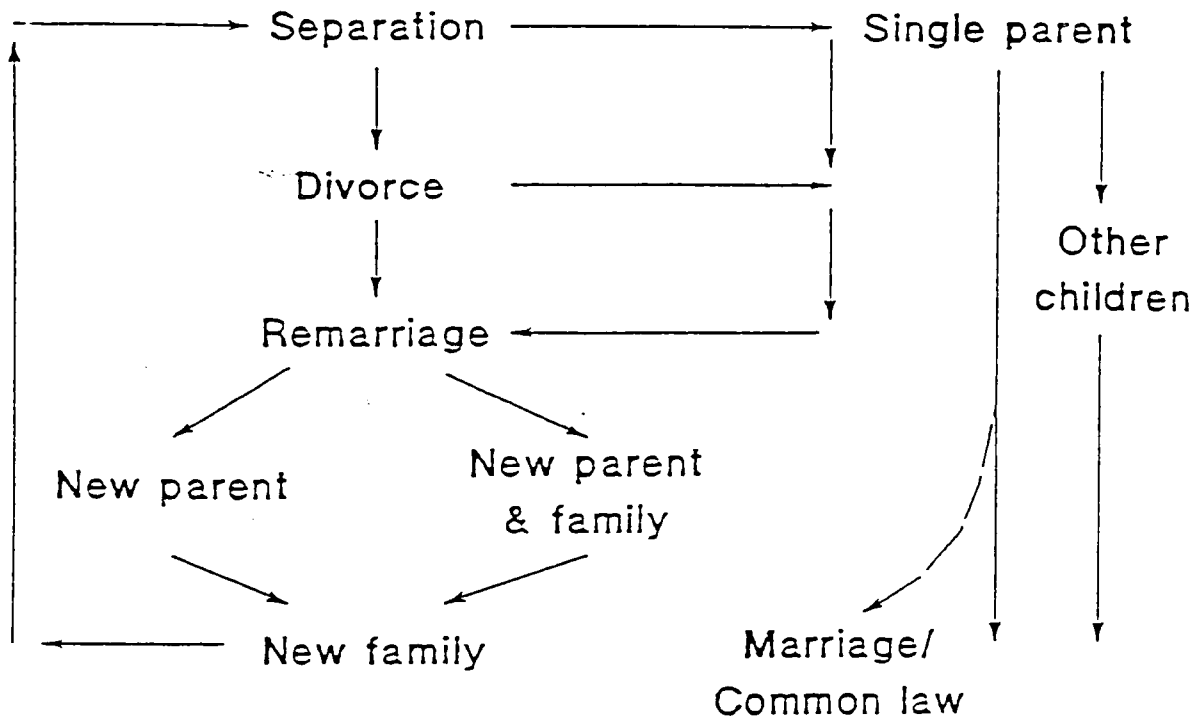
1. Parents to not speak English and insist on the 'home' language within the family.
2. There is little or no social interaction with the host community.
3. The parents are not literate in their own language.
4. Mothers are likely to speak a minority dialect.
5. The parents have little experience of education.

These factors make communication between the school and the parents very difficult and encourages poor development in both languages as the child is not linguistically competent in either. Practical home help in supporting the learning environment of the child is restricted. Cultural differences regarding the place of women in society are a barrier to achievement and may cause later conflicts of identity as the child experiences pressures from both cultures. The problems are compounded by medical and educational impediments to learning which interfere with accurate diagnosis and assessment.

Marital Problems

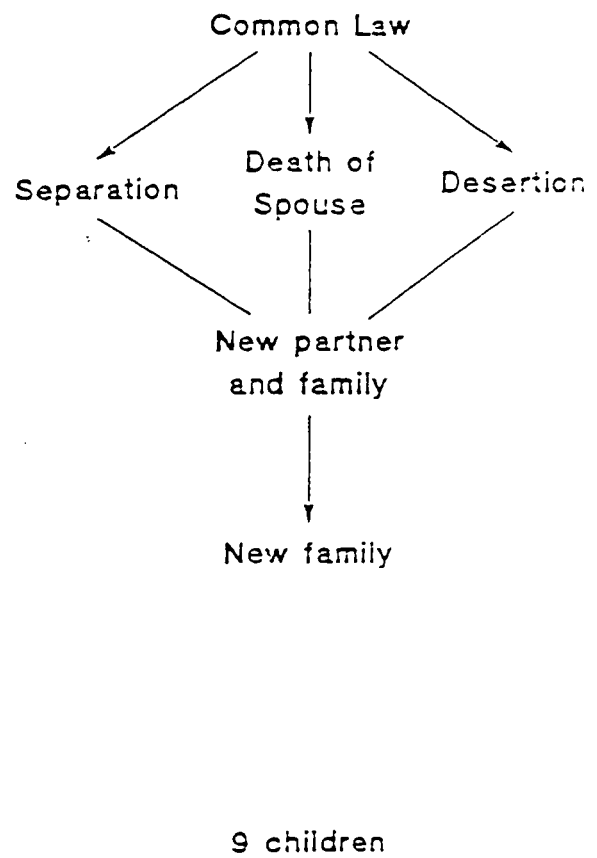
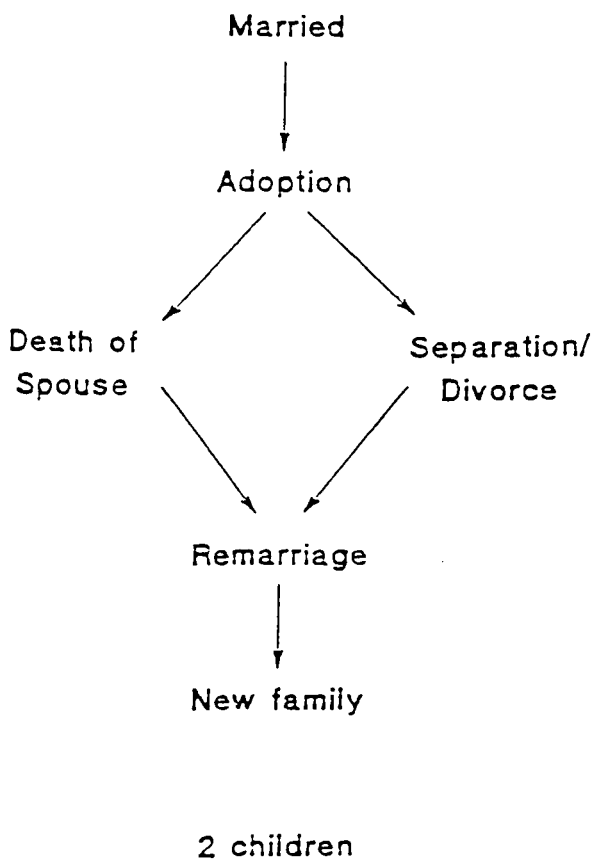
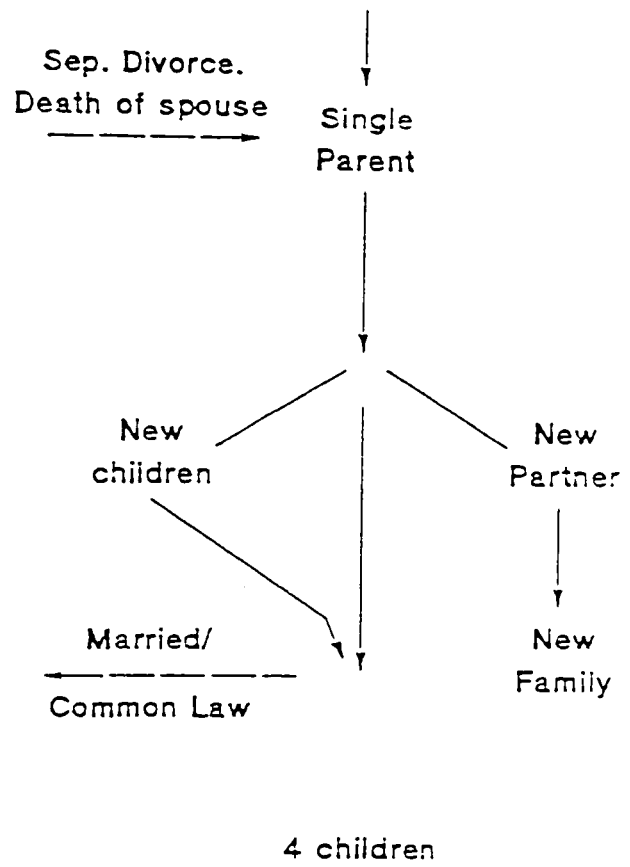
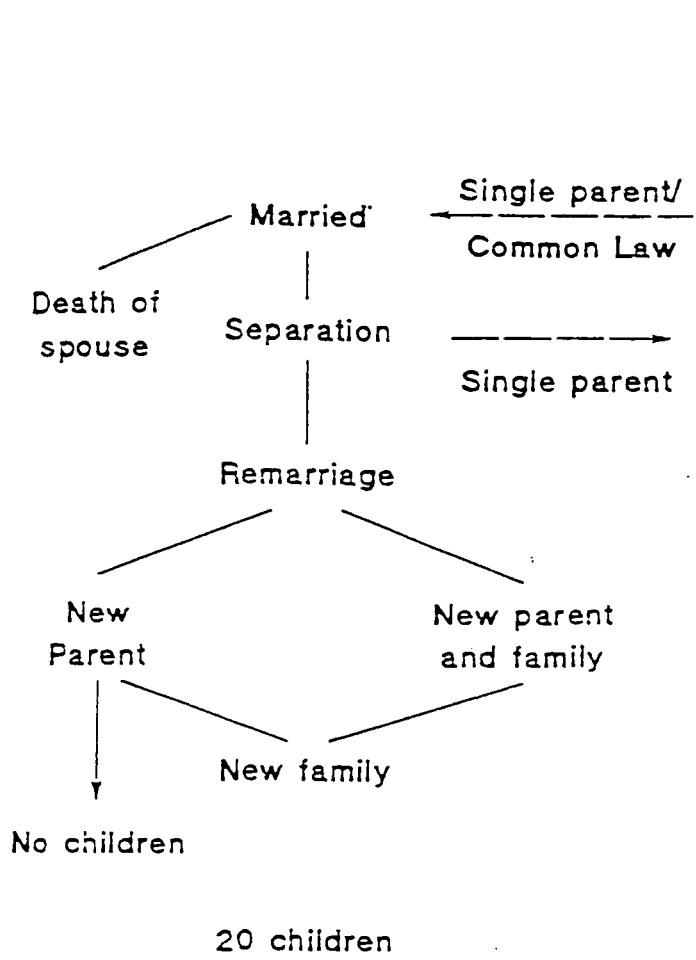
42% of all underachievers (as opposed to 26% in the total school population) relate to this variable. However, the variable is quite complex in that there are a number of sub-variables. 92% of recorded divorces are followed by subsequent remarriage. Twenty children (all in the most severe category of underachievers) are members of families where both parents have been married or had different partners twice or more times, and where the child has both half and step-brothers or sisters. In two cases the death of one parent has been followed by remarriage. One single parent has three children by different fathers all of whom were in the severest category.

(Figure 5.8) The Shape of the Family



Further, across the range of children in the total population there is an increasing positive correlation between this variable and underachievement but also a change in the positive correlation in relationship to the complexity of family life. The more stressful the home, the more influence this seems to have on underachievement.

(Figure 5.9) Complex Family Patterns of Underachievers



Parental Death

In the school year 1986-87 six children lost one of their parents. In two cases the death followed a debilitating illness involving prolonged home nursing. All six children are underachieving, with four in the most severe group of underachievers. However, it must be remembered that the criteria for measuring underachievement relies upon the principal of a stability of difference scores taken at 7+ and 9+. The traumatic incident cannot in itself be relied upon as a measure of cause and effect. What is clear however, is that the level of anxiety, within these households is very high. All six of the children are recorded as having serious social problems and five of the six parents remarried during the year following parental death:

(Table 5.10) Parental Death and Other Factors

	Parental Death	Criminal	Ed. Psych.	Remarriage
Child 1	/		/ /	/
Child 2	/	/		
Child 3	/			/
Child 4	/		/ /	/
Child 5	/			/
Child 6	/		/ /	/
	6	1	3	5

Criminal Activity

Eleven children are in this category which refers to the criminal conviction of one or both parents during the year 1986-87. This was the total known in the school:

Drugs 4	Sexual Attack 7	Theft 6	Assault 9
------------	--------------------	------------	--------------

Of the category concerned with sexual attack, six were perpetrated by parents on their children. Two of the assaults were serious attacks by fathers or step-fathers on the mother.

All, but one drug related conviction, is concerned with the father or step-father. There is also a tendency for cross-relationships between a number of variables to be strongly developed in this category:

Divorce and Remarriage, (6)
Education Psychologist (6)

Child Psychiatric Care (8)
Medical (3)

It is also interesting to note that of the six remarriages/new partners, five resulted in similar criminal activity within the year. Further, the families are a complex mixture of previous marriages, common law associations, with both step and half relationships prevalent.

Religious Exclusive

A small number of underachievers (3) (all this group) were withdrawn from any activity which had religious connotations. Many corporate activities were included. Their faith precludes any visits to the theatre, T.V. programmes, parties, school assemblies, drama performances and any music or dancing. The restricted curriculum further isolates them from the learning and social activities of the classroom. There is active and regular parental communication and support but a refusal to accept statementing. The children are actively encouraged by their parents to cultivate friendships within the faith. They are not allowed to participate in evening activities. None of these children are in the severest group of underachievers.

Summary

The relationship between underachievement and medical, social and development factors is positive and significant but not strong for the whole school population of 397 (1986-87). Children working to their potential or slightly 'overachieving' show no significant correlation

with recorded problems but underachievers display a strong positive and significant correlation. There is no significant gender difference in the whole school population or in the population of underachievers, only in the way in which underachievement manifests itself.

Long term problems are likely to have been diagnosed and supporting strategies developed but a restricted curriculum and language deprivation caused by social, medical and specific learning difficulties are related to underachievement. The severe group of underachievers are mostly children who live under high levels of stress and are suddenly confronted by a further traumatic factor in their lives or for whom the school itself, through their underachievement, gradually becomes an irrelevance in their lives.

They are likely to come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, have complex family relationships caused by remarriages, and where there is a history of violence, criminal activity or death within the family.

Underachievers are 2½ times more likely to be suffering from ill health than the general school population and are more likely to be truants.

A Behavioural Variable

The intention in this section is to examine the behaviour of the children within the classroom. As a measure of this behaviour I shall use the British Social Adjustment Guides (1989). At this stage the measurement is independent of underachievement. For the purposes of the research an overall measure of social adjustment is not needed as I wish to look specifically

at the levels of over-reacting and under-reacting behaviour within the classroom and later correlate this with underachievers:

For research in which social adjustment is related to variables such as educational attainment, delinquency, and cultural and social class factors, the most meaningful and significant results are likely to be obtained by using the scores for Unract, Ovract, the core syndromes, and in some cases the neurological grouping. (D. H. Stott, 1989)

The under-reacting and over-reacting measures in the B.S.A.G. are called UNRACT and OVRACT for convenience. The scale is measured 0 - 20+ and is divided into three groups:

(Table 4:11) British Social Adjustment Scores

Score	Group
0 - 9	Stable
10 - 19	Unsettled
+ 20	Maladjusted

The measure is based on the principle that severity of maladjustment is related to the total number of recorded items for each child. The measure is not weighted for the severity of individual items but is intended to give a general profile of children in terms of over-reacting or under-reacting behaviour. Low scores both in UNRACT and OVRACT are said to be representative of well-adjusted children.

The population within the school to be tested is that 9+ and 10+ years, 1988-89. These are seven classes numbering 190 children with 113 boys and 77 girls and 4 absences, 9 teachers were involved. During January-March 1989, the staff completed the B.S.A.G. scales. These are the results expressed in percentages (rounded-up to whole numbers).

Bristol Social Adjustment Guides

(Table 5.11) Test 1988

Score	Boys	Girls	All
0 - 9	42	72	54
10 - 19	34	21	28
+ 20	25	8	18
	100	100	100
Median Score	14.25	9.23	

The high median scores reflect the deprived socio-economic levels of the school population and the possible high levels of stress endured by the children. The National median is 5.7 for boys and 4.8 for girls.

In looking at the whole sample, just over half (54%) are in the 'stable' category, 28% or just over a quarter are 'unsettled' and the rest (18%) are in the maladjusted group. This reveals a worrying level of unsettled children in the school and a high level of maladjustment when matched with national norms:

(Table 5.12) B.S.A.G. National Norms

BSAG	Score Group	Boys	Girls	Total
0 - 9	Stable	58.10	70.92	64.35
10 - 19	Unsettled	24.96	19.21	22.16
20 +	Maladjusted	16.93	9.86	13.49

(National Child Development Study, 1972)

This shows the percentage of boys and girls in each of the standard categories of social adjustment. In the national norms there are 77% more boys than girls in the 'maladjusted' category and 12.82% more girls than boys in the 'stable' category. My study generally

confirms this distribution but has 13% more children in the unsettled and 'maladjusted' groups.

By looking at the number of children in the OVRACT and UNRACT categories it is possible to begin to see a pattern of behaviour emerging with regard to gender.

(Table 5.13) Distribution of Children as % of Total Population (BSAG)

	OVRACT	UNRACT	NEITHER	TOTAL
Boys	72	19	9	100
Girls	12	58	30	100

The distribution suggests that within the tests population boys respond to stressful situations in aggressive and confrontational ways whilst girls withdraw into depression, unforthcoming and introverted behaviour. The research was not able to examine changes in behaviour patterns due to the narrow age band that was used. However, I suspect that if strategies are not developed to alleviate the high levels of over-reacting and under-reacting behaviour this could lead to rising levels of school violence, truancy and crime; particularly amongst boys:

Analysis by age-groups showed, as regards UNRACT hardly any trend by age for either sex. In OVRACT, the scores for boys showed a regular rise from the age of eight years, accounted for in large part by an increase in hostility - which is as would be predicted of a form of response which is activated by adverse environment. The associated groupings in OVRACT also showed a marked rise, which is in agreement with the rise in delinquency rates up to the age of fourteen years. (Stott, 1974)

There seems to be clear evidence that the child's environment is a causal factor in maladjusted behaviour which is more clearly observable in boys because of the overt aggressiveness of their reaction:

In OVRACT there was a steady rise in score the lower the socio-economic status of the neighbourhood. This greater amount of over-reacting maladjustment in lower class districts was by and large confined to the most severe category. (Stott, 1989)

However, intervention strategies, particularly if conducted in small groups have been very successful. (Roe, 1965)

Early Schooling

An examination of the 9+ an 10+ population revealed an interesting phenomenon.

(Table 5.14) Early Schooling and Later Stability

	0-9 Stable	10-19 Unsettled	+20 Mal.	Total
Early Schooling (or Nursery) 4.6 years - 4.11 years	33 (70%)	9 (19%)	6 11%)	48 (100%)
Late Schooling (5.0 years to 5.5 years)	70 (49%)	45 (31%)	28 (20%)	143 (100%)
TOTAL	103	54	34	191

Even with the small sample size this tends to suggest that for this population, early schooling seems to result in much higher levels of later stability and smaller incidence of maladjustment. Those children who entered school six months prior to their fifth birthday appeared, on the whole, to be better adjusted. This may be due to the stabilising influence of early schooling but equally could be because children entering school early are healthier, come from more supportive families or are more socially adjusted.

Relationship between Underachievement and Behaviour

The measurement of underachievement (I.Q. minus reading test) as shown by standard units will be correlated with the scores obtained from the Bristol Social Adjustment Guides in order to explore the relationship between underachievement and classroom behaviour (Product Moment).

For all pupils (191) there is a correlation of +.48 between the degree of underachievement and the total scores on the B.S.A.G., representing behaviour. This is positive and significant but not very strong. However, correlating within gender revealed a correlation of +.21 for girls and +.71 for boys. The relationship between girls behaviour and underachievement was therefore not significant whilst the relationship between boys behaviour and underachievement was strongly positive and significant.

Given that boys high scores, but not girls, are mainly from the 'OVRACT' subscale this seems to confirm the study undertaken at the National Foundation for Educational Research by Dr. J. Morris (1959) and the suggestion made later in the B.S.A.G:

There is consequently some evidence that over-reacting maladjustment is detrimental to school achievement. (Stott, 1989)

What I am less sure of is whether poor behaviour is a contributory cause of underachievement or vice versa. What I suspect is that the underachievement is a complex interaction of overlapping factors fed by stress. The breaking point being mediated by the child's personality.

In-Service Courses

As a result of the teachers increasing awareness of the relationship between behaviour, stress and underachievement, I was asked to arrange two courses using collaborative teaching strategies and based on the classroom. In November-December 1989 in conjunction with the county educational psychologist six sessions were arranged. The teacher's set the parameters and aims by articulating the concern about dealing with potentially explosive situations within the classroom. All 14 teachers were involved and progress was discussed and minuted through year and full staff meetings:

1. Teaching difficult children
2. Behaviour modification

The teachers observed that a planned and progressive response needed to be clearly articulated. Responses to hostile or aggressive behaviour by the children were often seen as a threat to the teachers authority and dealt with by censure or punishment. Teachers were worried that responding aggressively to aggression in this way tended to reinforce poor behaviour in children and asked for suggestions by which these situations could be defused or avoided. A number of ideas were identified and tried out by the teachers. These are the notes for these sessions taken from the minutes of the meetings November-December 1989.

Modifying Behaviour in the Classroom (Aggressive Children)

Ignoring in a Planned Way

The teacher observes potentially disruptive behaviour and considers that on this occasion it will gradually diminish unless reinforced by the teacher's response. Intervention is thus limited to behaviours which go beyond acceptable limits or which do not seem to be losing

their force. Many confrontations can be avoided in this way and the calm and positive classroom climate is maintained.

Signalling

This requires a good relationship between teacher and child in order for the strategy to be effective. It also needs to be accomplished very early in the development of a possible confrontation. Some poor behaviour seems to occur because the child's own controls are weak or because the attraction of attention seeking behaviour is too strong. If two boys, for example, are about to fight the teacher can defuse the situation often by simply calling their names calmly, or ignoring the confrontation and asking one or both to help in some way. If blows have been exchanged however, it is much harder to interfere. In most cases good observation and early intervention has the best chance of success. A shake of the head, eye contact or raised eyebrows are often quite sufficient.

Nearness

The close proximity of the teacher has a calming influence on some children. Potential problems can be moved closer to the teacher's desk or the teacher can move around the classroom during activity periods to defuse incipient disturbances. However, this must not be presented as a punishment - rather as individual interest in the child.

Distraction

When children are set on an almost irrevocable spiral of deteriorating behaviour, distraction can often serve to defuse or intervene. A humorous or calm or interested question quite divorced from the problem at hand can sometimes divert the child's attention. This reduces

tension and diverts attention seeking. If the question or request is related to the child's interests then so much the better.

Interest and Affection

The development of sincere and positive relationships where the teacher is able to display honest affection can enable the child to feel supported when anger, hostility or frustration begins to develop. This is quite difficult to achieve with honesty when the child is particularly unlovable but this is the very occasion when the strategy is likely to be effective. However, insincere reactions will be quickly detected and can make the situation much worse.

Humour

Children respond very quickly to humour and find it very difficult to maintain aggressive behaviour whilst they are laughing. Humour reduces tension and can change a disruptive and aggressive child into a responsive member of the class in seconds. It must not however, be used to belittle children or sneer at childrens efforts through sarcasm. Children have little defence against sarcasm and in any case cannot respond without being rude to the teacher. Humour should not be aggressive and the most successful ploy is to get the child to laugh at himself or at the teacher.

Help over Problems

A great deal of problem behaviour is the result of frustration felt by the child because of their inability to cope with educational, social or personal situations. Many of these events can be prevented by early observation of difficulties and help to overcome them. Where possible

the child should be taken through the solution so that the positive learning strategy is reinforced.

Interference Technique

Too often interference is achieved through the teachers authoritative power - through threats, punishments and prohibitions. A much more positive and encouraging (as well as teaching!) strategy is to use the child's own perceptions of what is right:

1. **Personal relationships**

e.g. If you do that, it is not fair to me. Do you think that's right?

2. **Safety**

e.g. You might hurt yourself if you do that.

3. **Group codes**

e.g. If I let you use the computer when its not your turn the class won't think its fair.

Removal of Problems

The removal of a child from the scene of conflict in an emergency, makes it difficult for intense emotions to be maintained when there is no combatant with which to fight. It is also a preventative measure used to avoid violence or hysteria. It is a final resort and experience shows that it should only be used:

1. if it doesn't mean the irreparable breakdown of the relationship between teacher and child;
2. if there is a safe and satisfactory situation to which the child can be removed;

3. if there is no better alternative.

In the research a number of positive rewards and privileges were used to reward and reinforce good behaviour - badges, stars and the right to attend the end of the day film. This strategy should be used infrequently and with care. When a child is removed they should be given work or tasks to complete when they have calmed down.

Physical Restraint

This is not punishment but rather a passive restraint only used with very disturbed children to prevent serious harm being done to themselves or others. The teacher should remain calm and friendly but firm. This is quite difficult if you are being kicked on the kneecap at the time!

Within the classroom the emphasis should be on positive reinforcement of even slight improvement in behaviour or achievement. Praise and encouragement should be used freely but only when merited. Work should be read and marked regularly and interest and personal attention shown in the efforts of children. In this way positive rather than negative traits are rewarded and acceptable behaviour reinforced. If the child does not come up to expectation and censure is necessary, then punishment must be seen to be fair. The event should then be consigned to experience and another opportunity given to the child to learn the accepted behaviour. The process can be protracted and wearing on patience but the long term benefits for both teacher and child are likely to be good. What is certain is that censure and punishment on a disturbed child is storing up problems for the future.

Summary and Conclusions

The school population tested about normal on the I.Q. measures, though consistently slightly below the levels recorded for the total local and the national populations at 9+. The school population is consistently well below the norms in achievement (reading scores).

43% of pupils are underachievers (as defined) with 21% severely so, with no significant difference between boys and girls.

There is a significant correlation (+.50) between the total research populations achievement and the count of disadvantaging factors (medical, social and developmental). This is particularly significant when only looking at underachievers when the correlation is +.76. to some extent it is also noted the greater the degree of underachievement, the most 'problems'. There is no significant difference between boys and girls in this respect.

Half the pupils are noted on the B.S.A.G. as showing a high level of unstable (28%) and indeed maladjusted (18%) behaviour. Boys are more likely than girls to display unstable behaviour and even more particularly to show maladjusted behaviour. With boys this usually takes the form of over-reacting behaviour (hostile, aggressive) whilst for girls it is under-reacting behaviour (withdrawn, unforthcoming, depressive).

The 'creaming' of children at 9+ has implications for the way in which the local community perceives the standards and achievements of the school. There is an overt decision by many parents to obtain places at other school. This is partly due to the success by teachers at dealing with difficult children in that the school has attracted behavioural problems from

other schools and special needs initiatives, and partly due to a poor reputation. This reputation stems from the opening of the school when it opened to service those families displaced in the London slum clearance scheme. The initial intake was all boys of 12 and 13 and was an extremely difficult place in which to teach.

Supportive and interested parents are able to seek what they consider to be a better school and parents who give little help and support are not particularly interested which school their child attends and so the school tends to attract problems. That this perception of the school is both unfair and wrong is related to the inability and disinterest of the teachers to communicate efficiently with parents, to involve the school in the community and to advertise its strengths and successes.

The slightly depressed I.Q. scores may be related to the low socio-economic levels of the local area. High levels of stress have greater influence on achievement scores and may account, at least in part, for the low levels of achievement displayed by the school population.

Within the classroom the transient population and the unevenly distributed gender levels makes identification difficult and encourages low teacher expectation. This is encouraged by unstreamed classes with up to half of the children needing special attention and having a poor level of achievement.

The classroom is heavily male dominated and as boys do not achieve as well as girls at this age the general expectation of the children is influenced, particularly as the strong leadership will also come from the boys. The children's sub-culture therefore tends to devalue

achievement and value anti-authoritarian behaviours. Special language initiatives (the second language unit, the travellers unit and the religious exclusive children) also serve to depress the overall results and influence levels of teacher expectation.

The falling role influences the levels of teacher expertise. When specialists leave quite often they cannot be replaced. Further, diminishing income and rising material costs puts a strain on the production, maintenance and replacement of resources. The stress for teachers is quite high in these circumstances and tends to encourage staff isolation.

Certainly, the high levels of underachievement seem to be related to the severe levels of stress that children endure and this in its turn may be related to the greater incidence of ill-health amongst underachievers. By having up to 2½ more times absence through 'illness', underachievement is compounded and progress retarded.

Some forms of underachievement are not negative. Specific learning difficulties and some medical conditions are characterised by early identification, qualitative communication with support services, parental support and the production of individual learning packages by teachers. Some second language underachievers are also in this category. The classroom climate, the teacher's relationships with the children and the early identification of problems can prevent the formation of poor learning habits.

Of particular interest are the high levels of poor classroom behaviour as identified by the B.S.A.G. This seems also to be related to the high levels of stress and also to underachievement, but whilst both boys and girls rated highly on unsettled and maladjusted

measures, only boys correlated highly with underachievement. It is likely that the nature of the poor behaviour contains the answer to this seeming anomaly. The boys are characterised by hostile and aggressive behaviour and it is probable that the confrontational classroom exchanges between teacher and child serve to entrench this behaviour. Further, boys that are failing within the school system are able to support their poor self-image by becoming leaders of an anti-authority children's sub-culture.

Their underachievement and poor behaviour would gradually become inextricably entwined - unless identified and strategies developed by the teacher to encourage a positive attitude to learning. I suspect that much of the answer lies in taking a genuine interest in the problems of individual children and developing honest and positive personal relationships. A difficult task when the children the teacher wishes to help are so hard to like.

The girl's behaviour tends to be more passive - maladjusted and unsettled behaviour is characterised by unforthcoming and depressed responses. This is much more likely to receive an understanding and positive reaction from the teacher. This behaviour does not interrupt the classroom procedures or threaten the teachers authority. There is also time to develop a considered response to be problem. Girls also tend to respond better at this age to concerned adult encouragement and there is considerable research evidence to indicate that girls receive much more attention than boys in the classroom.

Chapter 6

STUDIES OF UNDERACHIEVING CHILDREN : INCLUDING PARENTAL VIEWS

Case Studies of Underachieving Children Including Parental Views

Teachers traditionally use the case study approach in order to diagnose children's performance. This chapter draws on this approach by profiling four children in order to sample the processes and causes of underachievement as they seem to be influencing particular children. To contain the scope of this research and to demonstrate the usual method used by teachers, I relied upon existing sources. A further piece of fieldwork was undertaken to sample the experiences of the parents through interviews of the four children profiled. This investigation was necessarily small and does not purport to be a representative sample of the views of all underachievers.

However, by examining a random sample it may still be possible to identify general factors that relate to the whole picture of underachievement and to illuminate the characteristics of underachievement within the school:

Number of children 4

Number of parents 5

Two hour long interviews were conducted and field notes were taken.

'A' Girl. Born in Pakistan 20.1.76. 2nd Year of Middle School. Eldest of two girls.

	7+		10+
N.R.I.T.	124	N.F.E.R. (BD)	120
Edinburgh Reading	100	Edinburgh Reading	96

'A' came to England in July 1985 with her parents and younger sister. She is a Hindu but this only influences her practical involvement in school during the statutory hours of education, with respect to the food she can eat. She brings her food to school and joins her friends in the dining room and is scrupulously clean. She joins in all social and religious functions. Initially she played solely with her sister with whom she is very close and supportive, but as her language progressed she has developed her own friendships. She is not allowed by her parents to join in out--of-school activities or to stay after school to watch activities. Her oral work is fluent but her written work is still substantially below average for her age and ability and she finds reading quite restricting. Her father speaks very little English and her mother none at all.

'A' is not allowed to play with English children in the evening, except occasionally to invite them to her home. She spends her evenings helping her mother to entertain other Pakistani families or playing with her sister. The home language is Urdu. The father has strong views about the role of women and the duty of his children to accept the decisions he makes for them. He is very supportive of the school and views the opportunity to gain a good education as being very valuable, within the strict limits of what is required of a Hindu woman. 'A' is polite, neat, well-fed and scrupulously clean. She has no English dress except her school uniform and she changes into Indian dress when she arrives home in the evening.

'A' is a gentle and willing girl, popular with her peers and sought after as a friend. She has a quick mind and a well-developed sense of gentle humour. She is never aggressive and is patient and sympathetic with others. She enjoys reading but is impatient with her inability to read fluently. 'A' is imaginative but her grammar, sentence construction and spelling are

very weak. She works well in co-operative situations and because she is a good organiser for whom others work well she is generally chosen by her peers to lead groupwork. She is comfortable in the company of adults. Her handwriting and presentation are meticulous and she grasps new concepts quickly but her vocabulary and memory retention were unusually low on the Edinburgh Reading Test profile. She enjoys all aspects of school life except games. She dislikes wearing sports kit, undressing in front of others, aggressive sport, physical contact and mixed-sex games. Her competitive instinct is internalised and is highly developed when judging her own success but not in relation to her peers. She attends the computer club and is interested in joining the choir but cannot do this as it meets after school and involves evening concerts which her father would not allow.

'A' is given positive encouragement by her father to respond well to the authority of the school and to take advantage of the opportunities education can offer but within the cultural definition of her upbringing. He is supportive of the school and attends all parent interviews though 'A' has to interpret. Within school she has not allowed cultural differences to isolate her and she has made lasting friendships with both boys and girls - though she tends to prefer the company of girls. Her home circumstances are somewhat different. The refusal to allow 'A' to go out in the evenings has isolated her from her friends and prevented her from developing social skills and cementing relationships with her peers, a situation which she is just beginning to resent. There are no English books in the home and 'A' is encouraged to read to her mother in Urdu which she seems to enjoy. Her mother is from an isolated village in Pakistan and is illiterate in her own language. She enjoys Indian language videos.

'A' is a perceptive and amenable girl who at present seems to be able to cope with the duality of her cultural existence and her bilingualism. Her improvement in English language is remarkable in two years but it is becoming apparent that her fathers perception of the role of female children is creating tension as it impinges on her growing sense of individuality. 'A' has expressed a wish to join out-of-school activities and visit the cinema and theatre and other school excursions. She was also very disappointed when she was refused permission by her father to attend a weeks course at a study centre. This was because it entailed sleeping away from home and was mixed sex.

Parental Interviews

'A's father seemed to view the school as having full responsibility for the social training of his daughter and required it to mirror the cultural demands of his background. At no time during the interview was the mother present in our discussions except to welcome me and to bring refreshments. 'A' was allowed to interpret but not to volunteer opinions. His attitude to education is to stress the importance of academic attainment rather than the development of self-actualisation. Arrangements have already been made by the father to return to Pakistan in order to arrange a marriage for his daughter.

'A's father kept the interviews on a formal and polite basis. He introduced me to his family on the first interview then took me to a private room to talk. No serious talk took place until we had eaten refreshments. Then he rather formally invited me to tell him what his daughter had done wrong so that he could put it right. In spite of the efforts made by the researcher to explain the purposes of the interviews the parent was still confused and concerned. Through

his daughter, who acted as interpreter, I explained again that I wanted his opinions as to his daughter progress:

I am very pleased about the progress of 'A', she is very good at speaking and the school tries very hard for her.

I was concerned that even though I had personally explained the purpose of the research before, that it still hadn't been clear. It demonstrated to me the tendency of those in authority to assume once something is explained that it is understood in the same way by all parties. Further, the use of the child for interpreting involved the information being filtered through the child's understanding and emotions. Her own worries and fears had coloured the way in which she had translated the initial information. It was clear that information of a formal nature that couldn't be understood by the child was not reaching the parent:

I want to speak to her teacher but don't know how to do it.

It is clear that the school should have access to mother tongue instruction for minority languages and at the very least ensure that oral and written communication should be conducted in the home language where possible - at least where a family had no adult English speaker. In this case it is clear that the parent was very supportive and encouraging to the child. He expected the values and attitudes of his home to be reinforced by discipline and high standards of behaviour and achievement at school:

My daughter must be polite to her teachers and do what she is told, she must not let her family down. She must work hard so that we can be proud of her and so that she can make a good marriage.

The father could not recall having received any information from the school except a note asking if his daughter could attend the school choir. This had been brought to his attention by

‘A’. He had refused because it meant her staying late after school and her coming home on her own. He had not received any information concerning parents evenings, social activities, visits or governors elections.

The tendency for schools to conduct most of their communication through formal and semi-formal letters makes it imperative that information is simple and concise. There is also a need to ensure that information is actually reaching parents. The appointment of a community teacher (a community language teacher could be ‘pooled’ serving local schools) or the use of the Educational Welfare Officer to encourage the efficient dissemination of information may be a way of bridging the gap between school and parent in this circumstance. Unfortunately, the tendency is for official communication (as demonstrated by my initial contact with the family) to be assumed to be threatening. ‘A’s father assumed that the school had his daughter’s welfare at heart but others may have taken up an aggressive position to defend their child against what can be perceived as impersonal authority. A more ‘open door’ policy of parental involvement in classroom activities, help with visits, social activities as well as fund raising events may also encourage the feeling of ownership of the school and sense of community.

The isolation of ‘A’s parents is underusing a valuable resource - an encouraging and supportive parent. ‘A’ does not have formal pocket money but has her savings from gifts at birthdays and is given money for school events. She wears traditional costume at home and is not allowed to play out at night:

I do not like my daughter playing on the streets. It is much better for her to be helping her mother or playing with her sister.

How much this attitude contributes to 'A's rate of linguistic development and socialisation is conjecture. Within school she is sought after but not speaking English within the home and being unable to socialise in the evenings and at weekends must have some influence on her development. There is also a perception that 'A' agrees and accepts the parent's attitudes:

My daughter prefers to be with her family. If she wants to bring friends home, she can.

She is not allowed to go with friends to the cinema and has only once taken a friend home. Within the family 'A' is helpful and bright and takes on tasks willingly when company is expected:

'A' cooked the whole meal with her mother when our friends came.

She is tractable and docile with a winning smile and pleasant manner and the tone of the fathers comments displayed a pride in his daughters achievements.

'B' Girl. Born Smethwich 23.2.74. 4th Year of Middle School. She is the middle child of three - an older brother and a younger half-sister.

	7+		10+
Nelson Cognitive	93	N.F.E.R. (BD).	104
Neale Analysis	76	Edinburgh Reading	89

The family history is very unstable. The eldest two children are the children of a common law husband who left the family in 1979 when he was imprisoned for drug-related offences. The mother moved to the local area to make a fresh start in 1980 and remarried in 1982. The

younger sister is the child of this marriage. The parents of 'B' applied for adoption papers in April 1983. The only close relation other than the immediate family is the maternal grandmother. She is very old and lives in sheltered housing locally. Both parents work and 'B' has the responsibility for getting the children off to school in the morning. She is also responsible for looking after the children in the evening and preparing a meal for the parents when they arrive home from work at about 6.00.

'B' entered infant school 5.9.79. She could not dress herself and could not read or count but responded well to the learning situation. On 8.5.80 the mother moved to the local area as a result of the break-up of her marriage. She took out an injunction to prevent her husband carrying out his threatened assault. She had been taken to hospital twice as the result of injuries sustained during family arguments and was concerned for the safety of her children. The children were placed on the 'At Risk' register and support was provided by the Social Services. Soon afterwards (at the age of 7) 'B' began to miss school regularly and returned home when the house was empty. When she did attend school she was tired and unwashed and her clothes were so grubby that the school undertook to have them washed with her mothers permission. 'B' often removed her underwear and attracted a group of older boys who wished to verify this fact.

'B' and her elder brother were caught shoplifting in July 1985 and when their rooms were searched by the police, tape recorders, a radio and a camera were found that had been stolen from school. The older brother was taken into care and 'B' and her younger sister were transferred to their present middle school in order to enable them to have a fresh start.

'B' continued truanting and stealing and violent and unpredictable behaviour began to manifest itself within school and at home. After being accused of stealing £10.00 from her mothers purse, 'B' attacked her mother with a knife. During an argument with another child in school, 'B' stabbed her with a pen causing a deep wound in the child's back that needed hospital treatment. 'B' is very domineering and is extremely violent. She is aggressive and threw a chair at a teacher who tried to intervene in an argument. She has developed a 'gang' which has been found to be extorting money from younger children. 'B' is very protective to her family. 'B's mother asked for psychiatric help for her daughters in 1985 and they attended the Child and Family Psychiatric Clinic.

In 1986 both parents were made redundant. 'B' became unmanageable at home and her mother asked for her to be taken into care. A case conference decision in May 1986 decided that 'B' would be better able to cope if she remained at home but with increased social service help. She was made the subject of a supervision order, placed on the 'At Risk' register again, social services provided a home help and assistance was given to obtain a cheaper council house.

The mother has found part-time employment but the family situation has further deteriorated. Both girls have been caught stealing and have become aggressive and difficult to control though the younger girl seems to have settled better into school. (Social Services Report 21.6.86) Conditions reached crisis level when as a result of being smacked 'B' stayed out all night, the step father left home and both girls were sexually assaulted by older boys in August 1986. Both girls admitted that the assault took place with their consent. 'B' was taken into care and has since given birth. She is now 15.

'B' was unable to concentrate for more than the shortest periods in class. She demanded constant attention and would deliberately disrupt the class by pushing over desks or hitting the closest child if it wasn't tendered immediately. She seemed constantly tired and tense and seemed unable to sustain effort. She was easily distracted and violent to her peers. She was also aggressive and uncooperative with adults. She took childrens belongings, taunted them constantly and broke her 'friends' equipment if they refused to share. 'B' received special ancillary help with reading and a 'paired' reading programme was attempted but not sustained because of her refusal to cooperate at home. She was often late for school and blatantly truanted - admitting to forging her mothers notes. Her mother had no option but to support her daughter as the alternative was a period of violence, misbehaviour and destruction in the home. 'B' was dirty and came to school tired and tense and had a derogatory self-image. She was orally quite lucid but in all other aspects of schooling she was unable to compete with her peers.

'B' was not able to work cooperatively as her inability to compete academically was immediately apparent and gave rise to a violent reaction. Her handwriting was badly formed and her fine motor abilities poorly developed. Her spelling was well below average for her age and she never wrote more than five or six lines of continuous prose. Any slight criticism - however gently presented - or any censure of her behaviour resulted in immediate confrontation, temper tantrums, swearing and tears of anger and frustration.

A special work programme was designed to improve her academic achievement and develop her social skills. A contract was agreed between the teacher, her mother and 'B', and I was to act as arbiter in any problems or disagreements that occurred:

1. minor goals of behaviour and attainment were set and rewarded with praise when achieved;
2. small responsibilities were given to her and trust shown in her. Personal record of achievement encouraged;
3. a full diagnostic programme was used to develop a personal course in English and Maths - individual help provided;
4. she was to work on her own with either a reading support teacher or her mother.

Her mother managed to attend for one day. Within two weeks 'B' had persuaded her mother to transfer her to another school. Within three weeks she had been taken into care.

'B' demonstrates by her behaviour and her avoidance learning strategies a high level of anxiety and a low level of personal esteem. Her early life was characterised by instability at home and anxiety at school. Her inability to cope with early learning strategies suggest that the essential mother-child early relationship was severely restricted and indeed her mother volunteered the information that 'B' was left with the elder brother from the age of four months.

The support and encouragement for 'B' was lacking in the family and she was perceived by her mother as a substitute parent for her siblings. There was very little positive contact between the home and school except when serious problems made it necessary. 'B' had no regular adult control and for much of her life had no father figure; her mother having three 'husbands' in five years. The home linguistic environment consisted principally of an older retarded brother and a much younger sister. She had no regular friends of her own age and was an isolate at school and a bully. Even the boys were frightened of her temper tantrums.

Parental Interviews

'B' mother saw her principal task to provide an income for her family. She found it difficult to develop close relationships with her children and was daunted by the level of aggression displayed by 'B'. She leaned heavily on the school and the social services but used them to threaten 'B' with dire consequences if she didn't agree to the mothers demands. An empty bluff that was ignored by 'B'. The mother asserted that the level of achievement was the school responsibility and that perhaps what was being taught was viewed by 'B' as irrelevant to her needs. Further, 'B' reacted violently against the school demands upon the children to conform and that as professional people, more effort should have been made to provide relevant stimulus to provide for her needs. She also felt that teachers did not make the same effort with 'B' as with other children in their classes and that they would not allow her to use expensive resources. She accused the school of failing her daughter - in being unable to develop 'B's strengths, assess her problems or to provide relevant strategies for improvement:

They never told me there were any problems until I got a letter. Then there were lists of things they had been saving up for months.

I have known 'B's mother for four years and have developed a friendly relationship such that I no longer solely represented the authority of the school. I was welcomed into the home and given a cup of tea. 'B's mother has had years of frustration at being unable to control her daughter and had used every threat she could devise to put the fear of god into 'B' to no avail:

The schools do nothing, (not you of course) they can't control her and if anything goes wrong they blame me.

The mothers first and lasting impression was that 'officials' were not interested in improvement, only in blame and censure. Her definition of 'officials' included all authority - teachers, social workers, and any paid officers of the council. She was scathing about communication:

All you get is threatening letters. If you don't do this or you don't do that 'B' will be taken into care. So what. It would be better for both of us if they really did it.

'B's mother said that she had been telling everybody for years that her daughter was trouble but nobody listened and fewer cared. It is hard to articulate in this study the depth of frustration, guilt, anger and hostility that was displayed when I asked her how much help she felt the school had given:

Help? I'll tell you about help. 'B' said one day she'd been assessed. I went down to that school straight away and gave them what for. Nobody assesses my girls without my say so.

What seems to have happened was that there had been some psychological tests done prior to assessment. When a letter arrived asking for her to attend a case conference to consider formal assessment, she was totally confused. As far as she was concerned the assessment had already taken place. 'B's mother was able to relate to those teachers who she perceived as

taking the trouble to listen to her and dismissed all other officials as interfering busybodies. She was not averse to threatening 'B' with a care order if it suited her. It was perhaps the impersonal way in which the crisis communication was done which irritated her the most:

Some of them talked about me and 'B' as though we weren't human - you know as if we weren't there.

The facelessness of officials increased her frustration, especially when no one seemed to have the authority to make decisions. She complained that everyone kept telling her to put her points in writing, but half the time she couldn't understand what they were saying.

She was confident that only two teachers would help her and that at least the school had tried because she realised just how difficult 'B' could be. Her ambiguous attitude to authority was caused, I feel, by her desire to find a way to stabilise 'B's behaviour both at home and at school and her inability to trust authority. This was complicated still further by her own frustration.

The mother found it difficult to make ends meet when her husband left and felt that 'B' should help to keep the family together:

B' got worse when he left and wouldn't go to school and because I had to go to work I didn't know. I asked her to get the others up but she never did.

'B's behaviour became increasingly more violent and unpredictable and she threatened her mother once with a knife and stole money from her purse.

Under extreme stress 'B's mother viewed authority with suspicion and their motives with distrust. Her experiences were almost entirely negative and frequently letters and telephone calls held undercurrents of threat:

Every time I get a phone call from the school I think that 'B' in trouble again.
Nobody ever has anything nice to say about her.

Her feelings of isolation and sense of being powerless to effect change forced her to make decisions that increased her sense of guilt:

I don't know - I have my other children to think of, perhaps it would be better for everyone if 'B' was taken in to care like they all want.

'B's mother made one last attempt to encourage 'B' to go to school by becoming involved with an agreed partnership with the school concerning behaviour and achievement. The attempt proved to be too little, too late. 'B' became almost uncontrollable at home though there was some improvement in school performance. Her mother attended only one session before 'B' persuaded her to send her to another school. 'B' was finally taken into care when she ran away from home and was eventually found by the police sleeping rough in London.

'C' Boy. Born in Houghton Regis 19.7.75 3rd Year of Middle School Second of three boys.

	7+		10+
N.R.I.T.	129+	N.F.E.R. (BD)	120
Spar Reading	100	Edinburgh Reading	97

'C' was a premature birth delivered by caesarean section. He developed hydrocephalus soon after birth. This is a condition which causes pressure on the brain and can lead to memory and motor dysfunction. An emergency operation was performed at the age of three months when a valve was inserted in his head to relieve the pressure. This undoubtedly saved his life. Both 'C's mother and father are extremely supportive and are helped by the extended family unit of both grandparents who live close by. The family unit is very strong.

On the advice of the clinical psychologist at Great Ormond Street Childrens Hospital 'C' was sent to the nursery unit when he was aged 3 years 2 months. This was to give the child the maximum level of sensory experience in order to encourage motor development. 'C' had regular hospital treatment until 1984 when a serious deterioration in his condition occurred. This resulted in an emergency brain operation and an extended recuperation period of three months. His condition has since stabilised though he is still required to take medication twice a day, suffers from severe headaches and has to be extremely careful of being knocked. A further operation to re-site the valve will need to be undertaken soon.

The medical condition has resulted in impaired memory function, a restricted attention span, a slow working rate and a tremor in both hands which becomes severe when he is anxious.

'C' is receiving individual tuition as part of the schools 'Special Needs' provision. He has also been provided with a typewriter which incorporates a memory function and display screen. This has encouraged him to write and his level of functioning has improved noticeably. 'C's mother volunteered to become involved in a corporate teaching strategy and to act as an ancillary reading support teacher two days per week. The course that 'C'

followed was designed to stretch his imagination, contained achievable goals that suggested further avenues of study and positively valued the principles of praise and encouragement. The course was designed by the teacher, parent, the county educational psychologist and the clinical psychologist at Great Ormond Street. When the outline was complete 'C' was involved to utilise his ideas and interests and to encourage him to feel an 'ownership' in the course.

Socially, 'C's medical condition has made integration quite difficult. He is unable to undertake any activity which involves physical contact. He suffers from intermittent severe headaches which causes him to be aggressive and short-tempered - quite the reverse from his normally gentle and tractable demeanour. Many of his peers find this apparent change of character difficult to cope with. He seems to enjoy school and responds positively to encouragement and praise but he is more at ease in adult company than with his peers. He tells me that this is because he is worried continuously about being knocked when he is with other children. He has a well-developed sense of humour and bears his handicap with fortitude and his discomfort without complaint. He is generally well accepted by his class but he does not work well with other children as his slow and painstaking methods seem to irritate them. He is viewed as an amiable eccentric by his peers and they tend to be quite protective.

The introduction of the electric typewriter, has created high motivation. The previously poor handwriting, erratic spelling skills and painfully slow working speed were eradicated at a stroke. He was suddenly capable of competing with his peers and producing work of quality

and quantity. This resulted in improved self-esteem and intellectual satisfaction. He produced his own magazine of short stories and a joke book for the class.

He does not like the rough and tumble of break times and prefers to read in the library where it is relaxed and quiet. He does not take part in any physical activity which involves contact and shuns any situation where there are crowds.

The Principal Clinical Psychologist at Great Ormond Street Childrens Hospital wrote to me in January 1986 that she was concerned about 'C's gradual deterioration in mental abilities that would result if motivation and interest were not maintained. She had noted the apparent discrepancy between potential and performance:

Indeed, 'C' gains 'gifted' spatial skills and a verbal I.Q. well above average. Unfortunately he is a boy whose tremor seriously interferes with his writing skills. He also has some problems remembering information and despite being of very high potential he has a poor memory and a slowness to write that may sabotage his ability. The WISC-R profile does suggest that there is a marked discrepancy between potential and performance. (Principal Clinical Psychologist, Great Ormond Street. January 1986)

'C' was assessed by the County Educational Psychologist in May 1986 and an evaluation of 'C's schoolwork undertaken by 'C', parent and teacher. It was agreed that no further action was required at this stage but that there would be a termly review.

'C' had many advantages over the other underachievers in this study. As a result of early diagnosis and continuous medical attention there was a regular, painstaking and qualitative monitoring of his condition. Further, excellent liaison was developed between the clinical Psychologist, the Education Psychologist, the school and the home. Home/School teaching

strategies have been developed and evaluation achieved by continuous assessment and regular case conferences. 'C' has the further advantage of a caring and supportive family unit which provides encouragement, motivation and resources.

Parental Interview

Both parents were present and I was made to feel very welcome. 'C' was present throughout the interviews on request of the parents. The mother described how 'C' was born prematurely by caesarean section that there was some early medical worry that he may be brain damaged. This did not occur but soon after birth 'C' developed hydrocephalus which resulted in a valve being fitted into his head. They have since had regular qualitative visits and reports from the hospital:

We have sometimes found it difficult to cope, but we have had so much interest and help by the hospital and my parents have also helped.

They also asked the school to appoint a liaison teacher to keep in touch with the hospital psychologist so that information about 'C's condition was continuously monitored. There was no evidence of guilt or frustration, rather a positive attempt to use the available expertise for the purpose of improving 'C's condition. The parents kept in close touch with the school and asked for monthly reports on his progress:

One of us visits the school to talk to his form teacher about once a month.

The medical evidence suggests that the impaired memory function, restricted attention span, slowness and slight tremor are unlikely to improve radically:

Keeping him interested and providing him with a variety of experiences will at least prevent further deterioration.

'C' is a gentle and placid boy who gets irritable only when he experiences severe headaches as a result of his condition. This tends to happen when he is under stress.

There is no difficulty getting him to go to school and though he doesn't have many friends this is because his parents believe, he has developed more intellectual pursuits to replace his inability to take part in 'rough' boys games:

'C' likes going to school and he looks forward to computer lessons and maths.

The parents have developed a communication system which is personal and particular. Liaison between professional support (educational psychologist, clinical psychologist, teacher, social services) is principally detailed and formal, but liaison with parents is face to face with a teacher responsible for monitoring 'C's progress. It is noticeable that this has developed at the parents instigation rather than a school initiative:

We felt that teachers would appreciate our interest and be able to develop proper courses if we were able to help at home.

'C' had the advantage of close and interested family. His attitude, ability and behaviour made it easy for people to give time and effort to his problems. His brothers were very protective and shared his interest in 'scholarly' pursuits and so he is able to prevent social isolation through lack of peer friendships.

'C's parents were grateful for the range and quality of the personal interest shown by teachers and doctors. They were convinced that their son would have deteriorated but for the consistent monitoring of his condition and the provision of specific educational resources.

'D' Boy. Born in Birmingham 30.1.75 3rd Year of Middle School. He is the oldest of two - a younger half sister.

	7+		10+
NRIT	124	NFER (BD)	119
NFER (BD)	104	Edinburgh Reading	102

There is a recorded history of instability, violence and second language problems, from the nursery school to the present time. 'D's mother was seventeen when he was born. His father was a French speaking student on a short English language course at Birmingham University; they were married in March 1976. the child was cared for by the maternal grandmother whilst the mother worked as a waitress and the father attended university. In 1980 'D's mother finally tired of the fathers drunken violence and obtained an injunction to prevent further assault; upon which the father abandoned the family and returned to France. They were divorced in May 1981. 'D' received medical treatment for enuresis, sleepwalking and fits but no medical cause was discovered and all have gradually improved.

'D's mother remarried in June 1981 and a baby girl arrived in July 1981. The step-father is Turkish speaking and was a student at Bedford College taking a short-course in English. They moved to Luton in March 1983 and then to the present home in Houghton Regis in February 1986. 'D' had attended three schools before the age of 9. The mother works long hours at a motorway cafe and the father spends long periods abroad. 'D' returns home to a neighbour who gives him tea. The baby is left with a childminder until the mother returns home at approximately seven o'clock.

In 1982 'D's behaviour both at home and school deteriorated. The mother was constrained to seek advice from a child psychiatrist about his lying, stealing and aggression. The psychiatrist could find no physical basis for these manifestations and drew the conclusion that they were the result of stress caused by the birth of his sister, the re-marriage of his mother, the change of school - all symptoms exacerbated by the child's insecurity. No serious psychiatric condition was discovered. Absence and truancy continued.

'D' is unable to work cooperatively with other children. He is critical of the ideas of others and derogatory of personalities. He is violent and abusive when others disagree with him. His social skills are poorly developed and he seems unable to share materials and make lasting friendships. He reacts violently to censure and has been known to attack his teacher so uncontrolled is his temper when he is annoyed. He has a history of bullying and of self-inflicted injuries. His temper swings quickly between extremes but he responds well to praise when it is not tendered publicly and has produced work of excellence when working on his own.

A recurrence of violence and stealing at school resulted in 'D' and his mother attending the Child and Family Guidance Clinic in October 1983. At no time has his father attended case conferences, school interviews, or taken any interest in the child's development. 'D's mother believes that the father may have a wife in Turkey and that he intends to return to her. In the meantime she is attempting to provide a home for her children and develop her independence by being financially secure. She believes that it is her responsibility to ensure that her children are well-fed, adequately clothed and able to experience holidays and excursions. She

relies heavily on the school to encourage the development of 'M's educational and social abilities.

In September 1985 'D' was placed in the class of a senior teacher experienced with the teaching of difficult children. 'D' responded well to the combination of good humour, high standards of behaviour and educational achievement, encouragement and trust. This also corresponded to a period of stability at home when his maternal grandmother moved in to care for the children. 'D's mother told me how much happier 'D' was at home and school. His violence had decreased, enuresis disappeared and he hadn't experienced a fit for several months.

At school his form teacher has remarked on 'D's improvement in behaviour. He has joined the football club, the basketball club and the school choir - in all of which he has represented the school. His drama work is excellent and he is learning to work more cooperatively though he still only blossoms in a group when the others accept him as undisputed leader. There is less absence and truancy and he has developed a sense of humour and is (incredibly) able to laugh at himself on occasions. However, his behaviour is still unpredictable and anything can trigger a violent outburst or an aggressive physical response.

Parental Interview

Only the mother was present at the interviews, though 'D' came into the room to bring me a cup of tea. He was relaxed and obviously pleased to see me. This was a great deal different from my first contact with the family.

'D's mother was well educated and purposeful. She had determined when she started to have problems with 'D's behaviour and achievement that she would use every avenue of support that she could find. On occasions she found the attitude and response of teachers to be rather threatening and a little condescending:

When they asked me to go in and see the headmaster, I felt I was back at school again. You feel so small when you wait outside the room.

The language used by teachers to describe the children assumes a degree of understanding by the parents and a tacit belief that parental and school views are similar. What seems to be forgotten is that there will be a personal reaction by the parent to teachers comments:

When they say that your son is not normal you wonder if it is the way you have brought him up.

and a sense of guilt at the shortcomings of their child. This sense of guilt can be expanded by the way in which teacher's assume that they can ask direct questions about the private lives of parents:

He asked me if anything had happened at home to cause his change in behaviour. I wasn't going to tell this stranger my personal problems.

The sense of worry for the future can also develop if not carefully handled. 'D's mother felt that early on in the process teacher's began to expect 'D' to behave badly. He was banned from school outings and not allowed to represent the school in punishment for a serious misdemeanour:

If you expect children to behave badly then more often than not they will. So much better if you praise him for what he does well. Stopping him like that will make him even more of a problem.

She also worried that she was under pressure to agree to the suggestions of the school. She felt manipulated for the schools purposes rather than a partner in helping her son over a difficult time. She did not have the impression that there was an interest in 'D' as an individual and began to lose confidence in the school:

I worry that he will be 'picked on' if I don't do as I'm asked or that they will be ready to label the next one in the family.

She even considered changing schools.

Then 'D' was placed in a class with a teacher for whom he had a particular rapport. His mother also felt he was someone that had a personal interest in 'D' and trusted his judgement:

It was like a weight off my shoulders.

'D's behaviour and school attitude to work improved and an intervention process was developed at school and at home to praise D's small improvements and to reward good behaviour in order to minimise the possible reinforcement of bad behaviour habits.

Comment

In the case study of 'A' the principal cause of underachievement seemed to indicate cultural and bilingual factors as underlying influences. There was strong home support for the child's education and a positive parental view as to the value of education in the child's development. Consequently, deterioration was unlikely and the root causes of 'A's underachievement could be addressed. Further, 'A's positive attitude to the school and her personal and social skills enabled her to cope with the duality of home and school caused by cultural and language differences.

The case study of 'C' (Boy) showed the specific cause of his underachievement to be medical. The deterioration in his achievement was directly related to the progression of his illness. The important factors again in enabling the child to develop strategies for improvement were:

The assessment of underachievement,

Qualitative and regular medical reports,

Positive and constant home support,

Encouraging and demanding school environment,

The development of personal and social skills.

These factors were supported by a high degree of qualitative liaison between home, school and the medical services; the production of materials and resources; the attraction of funds and the development of stable and encouraging relationships between the teacher and the child.

In the studies concerned with 'D' and 'B' the causes of underachievement seem to be related to a number of factors which conspired to overwhelm the child's desire or ability to develop strategies to cope with the problem. There is evidence to suggest that early language development was stultified by lack of close adult relationships and social and personal development marred by violence and instability within the family. Indeed, the parental interviews with these two families were conducted in an atmosphere of almost tangible guilt and stress. Whilst the adults in both families were concerned about the problems of their children, home/school programmes and liaison were not maintained. The effectiveness of any remedial programme was therefore placed in doubt; for without home support, when the

child came anxious and violence, anti-social behaviour or truancy occurred. Further, the family came under stress in this circumstance, and to minimise the effect of the child's violence, connived with the child to feign illness or to truant. The child was not learning how to cooperate with others, rather he was developing negative strategies with which to service his inability to cope with his underachievement and was trapped in a cycle of deprivation.

Nevertheless, in some circumstances, despite the instability of the child's home life, the school was able to achieve a marked improvement in the child's attitude and achievement. This seemed to relate to the child's ability to view the school as a supportive and encouraging environment and to respond positively to the demands placed upon him.

Analysis of Parental Views of Underachieving Children

Counselling

Parents under stress are likely to influence the distress levels of their children. Early personal contact with class teachers rather than headteachers is required and opportunities for the parents views to be valued and respected. All too often contact is made as the result of a crisis within the school and is therefore negative and punitive. Parents continually stated how they were presented at their first meeting at the school with a list of misdemeanours perpetrated by their child. The initial emotion was therefore one of guilt and the desire to protect the child from the school. This sometimes led to aggression and the need to place blame on the way in which the school had failed the child. It is very important that a positive and encouraging atmosphere be carefully developed by the school and thought taken as to the ways in which the parent's view of oppressive authority could be diminished.

Communication

The correspondence between school and parent was generally viewed as too formal and impersonal. A letter from the school was seen as a threat and little use was made of encouragement or praise - valued highly by both child and parent. The tone of letters also tended to assume that the schools position was the only right one.

There was a tacit suggestion contained in this that the parent would be failing the child if they didn't agree. The attitude of the parent was seen to be the result of impersonal and unintentional condescension in the ways that letters were framed. A further complaint was mentioned in the ways in which telephone calls were often not acted upon.

The more responsive and stable families found the school to be helpful and encouraging. It is possible that the teachers found dealing with cooperative parents much easier to cope with. There is certainly more evidence to support the view that these families received a greater degree of teacher time and personal interest. Further, the gratitude of parents might have encouraged teachers to become involved with long-term monitoring and there was a clear partnership developed between parents and teachers.

Special problems were noted about the communication strategies concerning the needs of non-English speaking parents.

Assessment

Most parents found the process rather than the outcome distressing. This centred around the way in which decisions were communicated to the parents. They complained about not being listened to or consulted when children were assessed. The process tended to alienate parents

and encourage aggressive responses in order to protect their child against what they perceived as impersonal authority.

A degree of frustration was also caused by the use of complex language and the fact that 'partnership' between school and parent generally developed under crisis and was really the parent agreeing to do what the school suggested.

Chapter 7

CHILDRENS PERSPECTIVES ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT

I was interested in finding out the ways in which children viewed the impediments to achievement. The research took the form of six one hour drama lessons over weekly intervals during the first half term of Autumn 1987 and involved 201 children aged 9-13 years. At the end of the period each group was asked to compile a list of responses to the question:

‘What discourages or encourages my learning?’

The groups were not restricted as to the number of responses that were recorded, in fact they were encouraged to write down all their ideas. The number of staff involved was 7.

The resulting responses constituted the data for the children’s perceptions and were coded by using categories identified through the literature review and by allowing the sub-categories to develop from the nature of the children’s responses. This was the same method used in coding the teacher’s responses and was designed to enable broad comparisons to be made.

(Table 7.1) Childrens' Perspectives on Underachievement

	Year 1 %	Year 2 %	Year 3 %	Year 4 %	Total %
<u>Home</u>					
Parental Attitudes to School	7	5	6	4	5
Family Relationships	10	12	5	4	18
Material Facilities	2	4	5	10	6
Emotional Disturbance	8	4	5	3	4
Demands Upon the Child	2	2	4	10	1
	29	27	25	31	28
<u>Child</u>					
Specific Learning Difficulties	10	4	2	2	4
Medical problems	8	4	2	2	4
Social Relationships	8	13	15	15	12
Behaviour	9	5	4	4	5
Self Concept	2	6	13	13	10
	37	32	37	36	35
<u>School</u>					
Environment	2	2	3	1	2
Organisation	2	2	3	1	2
Curriculum	1	2	2	1	2
Discipline	5	5	5	7	5
	10	11	13	10	11
<u>Teacher</u>					
Skills	4	5	4	4	4
Classroom Climate	6	6	4	2	5
Relationships with Children	12	17	17	14	15
Expectation	2	2	3	2	2
	24	30	28	22	26
Total Responses	119	109	102	135	465

Analysis of Responses

The Home

28.4% of the childrens' responses identified the home as being an important cause of underachievement. The younger children seemed influenced by insecure family relationships and personal trauma whilst older children seemed more aware of the debilitating effect of poverty and the depressing influence of too much family responsibility. Many children were prepared for school by older siblings because both parents were working and returned home in the evenings to child minders.

Parental Attitudes to School

The children seemed to be aware of the influence that parents exerted by not displaying encouragement and interest in their achievements or in the development of good learning habits:

'My dad never helps me with my homework. He says he cant do it and my mum hasnt got the time'.

The children were also concerned that their parents maintained a positive relationship with the school and showed support for success:

'Your parents only come to see your work when your in trouble'.

Many children seemed to be aware of the importance of positive and encouraging attitudes and by the parents relationship to the child's need for success and approbation:

'If my mum said you will get a pound for every A or B you get on your report. That would make me work'.

But as well as material rewards the children testified to the desire to please their parents and gain approval by conforming with their parents views of academic success:

‘I am encouraged to learn because I want my family to be proud of me and be a doctor’.

Quite often the fears and disappointments of the parents came through the comments made by the children and displayed the attitude that education represented for them:

‘If you cant work hard you will get on the dole but that will be a problem because that money wont get you anywhere and you cant raise kids or by foods’.

The attitudes of the parents just as often reinforced failure:

‘My dad says he never did good as school and hes alright so it dont matter if I’m no good’.

‘If I dont want to go to school my mum writes me a note when I’m in a mood’.

The first of these two responses was concerned with parents attitudes to academic success whilst the second was a view of the school in social and emotional terms. The influence of parental attitudes on the development of positive learning habits remained constant throughout the four years.

Family Relationships

This sub-section received the largest number of responses in the category concerned with the influence of the home on underachievement. These responses represented 25% of the total responses for this category and seemed to be more influential on the behaviour and

achievement of the younger children. The children saw aggressive and violent relationships as being contributory factors to the development of anxiety and the concomitant effect this had upon achievement:

‘When I’m trying to work my brother is always teasing and hitting me’.

The younger children seemed concerned with a large number of responses relating to sibling rivalries. The older children seem to be far more aware of the more serious and threatening influences. Trying to cope with the breakdown of marriage, divorce, and death seemed to have a long term influence on achievement:

‘My new dad is always telling me off and he doesn't like me’.

‘You can't work when your parents are always arguing. It put you in a mood when you go to school and you hit your best mate and have a leppy’. (temper tantrum)

The influence could be traumatic enough to cause the development of school phobia and have a serious effect on the child's developing sense of identity:

‘When my dad and mum blame me for things I haven't done and hit me and ground me I get in a mood and won't go to school’.

Some responses referred to the way in which the unconscious levels of guilt which were present in the breakdown of marriage were sometimes passed on to the children - some were explicit:

‘My mum says if I work hard and behave myself my dad might come back’.

and some were implied:

‘You have to work much harder at home if you have only got a mum and not be any trouble’.

The suggestion made by the parent, perhaps tendered sub-consciously, was that the child was in some way contributory factor to the problems within the home and that the child’s performance and behaviour at home and school was somehow linked to the happy resolution of severe family difficulties. This implied threat and the child’s guilt resulting from the inability to resolve the situation, could lead to high levels of anxiety and increasing performance and behaviour problems.

These more serious problems seemed to remain unresolved and exerted constant influences on the child’s attitude towards learning. They also influenced the way in which the child behaved in relationship to other children and the way in which he related to the school. In particular, they over-reacted, sometimes violently, to rejection or censure:

‘When I didnt get picked I got in a mood and ran out of school so he (the teacher) couldnt have a go at me’.

Material Facilities

The younger children seemed to be less influenced by material needs but were well aware of the influence of poverty, overcrowding and the lack of books in the home:

‘Your house cant have any room to work’.

‘If you want to work at home you havent any books so you dont’.

By the fourth year strong sub-cultural influences were modifying the attitudes of the children and there were many more responses which demonstrated the importance attached by the children to material things:

‘You need proper trainers if you want to be good at P.E.’

‘The thing is you can learn better if youve got your own trumpet’.

The lack of material facilities did not seem to be serious in itself but increased the inability of the child to compete with others to be accepted as a member of a preferred peer group and to experience events and activities which others took for granted:

‘If your mum hasn’t any money you cant go on trips and you (are) dumb’.

This had implications for the way in which children evaluated their worth and for the development of values and attitudes.

Emotional Disturbance

This was where events in the childrens lives had caused deep-seated anxiety which were both long term and unresolved. The younger children seemed to be able to articulate these problems and were more willing to seek a caring teacher to share their concerns:

‘When I think about my dad I cry and get into trouble so I talk to Mr.....’.

The responses from the older children were mainly oblique references to threatening circumstances in their lives:

‘Your stepdad always comes into your room and moves things and reads your diary’.

'I got in a mood when my dad got drunk again and hit my sister and sent me to my room so my homework didnt get done again'.

Demands Upon the Children

Many of the children were used as substitute parents as they grew older. The problems of unemployment locally had resulted in both parents having to take part-time employment often during unsociable hours. Many responses referred to looking after younger children:

'If you have to take your sister to school and look after her you get too tired'.

It was noticeable that the responses from the 12+ year were more than six times greater than from the 9+ year:

'You can be late and not get your kit and dont have your dinner if your late'.

This had implications for the development of good learning habits, for the acquisition of poor role models and for the lack of adequate supervision:

'You stay out late and shoplift and I dont care if I get caught because my dad will duff him up'.

The Child

The largest number of responses related to this category of variables. They accounted for 35.3% of the total responses. The 9+ year seemed more concerned about perceived learning difficulties. By 12+ many children had been diagnosed and remedial strategies developed. The younger children also seemed concerned with minor ailments and short term medical problems and poor behaviour as major causes of underachievement. The older children were

concerned about the way others perceived them, their relationships with others and their relative worth within the classroom.

Specific Learning Problems

The children seemed quite aware of their learning difficulties, some of whom may not have been diagnosed. Many children were only identified when they were referred for behavioural reasons. The number of responses dropped significantly from the 9+ to the 12+ year. The younger children referred to relatively minor problems in general which related to their failure to acquire learning skills :

‘If you cant write fast and dont join up you cant write quick’.

Others of the younger children revealed how their feelings of inadequacy and failure led inevitably to frustration, a sense of failure and to anti-social behaviour:

‘If you cant read You might throw the books or tear’.

The responses from the 12+ year were fewer in number but represented a sad indictment upon the school in that the earlier problems did not seem to have been diagnosed and intervention strategies implemented:

‘It don’t matter if you cant read I’m going on the dole anyway’.

Already the sense of failure was well established and the children were caught in the trap of minimising the importance of their failure in order to maintain a healthy self-image. There was also an undercurrent of sullen accusation which led inevitably to poor behaviour. Some responses questioned the sense of attending school if nothing was learned:

'I dont do nothing so you might as well do nothing at home'.

Medical Problems

Most of these responses originated in the 9+ year. They were relatively minor in nature and may be related to the nervous anxiety of moving from the lower school to the middle school:

'I get headaches when I try too hard'.

But there is a hard core of medical problems which though they are not severe, interfered with the childs ability to develop positive learning habits:

'You cant help it if dont hear because Im deaf'.

The more severe medical problems - diabetes, epilepsy, leukaemia and others - generally were well-documented and received continuous and qualitative attention but they could still influence the child's ambitions, their feelings of self - worth and their sense of achievement. Illness could also influence achievement by causing a number of undiagnosed and unspecific variables - tiredness, lack of concentration, aggression, listlessness, a feeling of dread and of resignation to failure:

'The first thing was when I was in the second year I thought I was going to join the RAF until I found out I was ill'.

Social Relationships

The responses for this variable represented the second largest category accounting for 12.3% of the total responses for the study. One prime motive for achievement appeared to be the attempt to earn status, esteem, approval and acceptance within the learning group. To some this meant achieving concrete evidence of success through healthy competition:

‘When my mate gets a housepoint I think I’ll have to work and get one to’.

Friendship groups were seen as positive elements in the acquisition of good learning habits:

‘I like working with my friends and having a laugh but I dont mind stopping when I’m working’.

The responses in this section were far more numerous in the 12+ year and demonstrated a well established anti-establishment pupil sub-culture.

Some pupils were caught in a vicious circle where their anti-school attitude and low attainment progressively reinforced each other:

‘You can get hassled by people and beaten up if you dont let them copy’.

There was also heavy pressure brought to bear on children to conform to the anti-establishment views:

‘If I try to do well my friends call me a poof and a big-head’.

There seemed to be a definite feeling that some children had little scope for achieving anything worthwhile on the schools terms, with implications for the way in which the teacher responds to childrens work; develops positive relationships with difficult children and plans encouraging learning strategies :

‘I worked all weekend and wrote four pages and he put a line through it’.

The children were driven to achieve a sense of belonging, of esteem and worth from membership of the counter-culture rather from belonging to and identifying with the school

ideals. Failing to win social approval through the curriculum and the school formal activities they developed a well defined set of behaviours and methods for punishing non-members:

‘People come round and make rude comments about my work and I get mad’.

‘You get teased and you cant tell as they beat you up’.

Behaviour

Whereas I had taken social relationships to be a manifestation of pupil to pupil behaviour, this section deals with classroom behaviour directed at the teacher. The responses ranged from simple non-compliance:

‘When I get in a mood I sit in the corner so he cant see me’.

To overtly disruptive behaviour:

‘I dont like writing so I throw my pen’.

The bulk of the responses from the 9+ year were relatively minor in nature and consisted of noisy or non-work related talking - not getting on with the learning activity or mid misdemeanours such as being out of ones seat, fidgeting or eating but these ‘minor’ responses seem to be the early symptoms of later severe problems. The way in which school procedures were explained and implemented, the consistency of the teachers response to poor behaviour, the organisation of a stress free learning environment and the development of friendly and encouraging relationships, were all mentioned as being important factors as dealing sensitively with these early responses. It was also seen as crucial that teachers should be seen as school issues and strategies developed as a corporate response. This has implications for in - service training and the effective use of external experts.

Though the number of responses were fewer in number by the 11+ and 12+ years, the responses referred to much more serious misbehaviours. These included direct disobedience, physical aggression, refusal to accept discipline or punishment and persistent absence:

‘If you dont like the lesson you just bunk off. It dont matter’.

Lying became as important to some children as the truth was to others:

‘You get told off so you tear your books up and say he done it not me sir’.

And stealing was a way of gaining esteem.

Analysis of the responses from the older children indicated that the comments originated from ten separate groups and therefore the anti-school comments were related to about ten children who seem to have a disproportionate influence on the other children. The children also referred to boredom caused when the lesson content was of little interest because the learning activities were too passive or the manner of presentation failed to sustain their interest and attention:

‘The thing is you get bored to write and not do nothing interesting’.

Poor behaviour was therefore a symptom of poor achievement but was caused by a multiplicity of interrelated factors and seemed to be inextricably connected to the way in which the child was able to maintain their psychological and social health in the face of severe stress.

Self-Image

The recognition of the individuals worth seemed important to all years as was the need for self-realisation. The children who were failing seemed to have the need to identify their failure as a physical, social or ethnic attribute - and included the notions that being female, fat, black etc., influenced their ability to achieve academic success :

‘If you get fat nobody likes you and you dont get chose for groups’.

The other aspect of self-concept seemed to be the worth that individuals placed upon themselves. If this involved a long period of an experience of academic failure then this seemed to undermine the development of a positive attitude and motivation towards learning. It seemed to contribute to a progressive alienation from school and what the school had to offer:

‘I dont work quick so I like to be on my own. If I sit quiet I can do nothing’.

The teachers reinforced the view of the child’s perceived failure, often unwittingly, by the way they conveyed messages regarding attitudes and expectations about the child’s ability and their misbehaviours:

‘You might get your maths wrong and he says your thick’.

The responses revealed that improvement in behaviour and attainment could be achieved by setting up experiences which enabled pupils to be more active in the planning, task and feedback of learning experiences:

‘Computers are great to learn better when your not interefered all the time by teachers’.

Also there seemed to be a tendency for children to look for a concerned teacher with which to achieve individual and positive relationships and often a sense of humour was seen as important:

‘I done well in English this year because you can have a laugh’.

The School

The responses of the children intimated that in general they perceived the school as a supportive and therapeutic institution. They were more concerned with the curriculum organisation which prevented them from avoiding staff that they disliked, distrusted or had no confidence in. There were only 10.7% of the total responses referring to this variable and was the lowest response of all the categories.

The Teacher

The variables within this category received 25.6% of the total and contained the variable with the highest number of total responses. The teachers relationships with children received 69 responses 15% of the total. This is perhaps a measure of the importance attached by the children to the influence of the teacher in encouraging or discouraging the achievement of children, the development of their abilities and the social development of their personality. Except for the younger childrens' more positive response to physical environmental conditions the responses were evenly distribute across the variables and throughout the four years. The most comments referred to the importance that the children attached to the fairness, sense of humour, personal relationships, feedback, interest and encouragement displayed by good teachers.

Teaching Skills

The children perceived this variable to have two distinct components; the teacher's general skills of delivery, blackboard work, and the teacher's specific skills; feedback, marking. The general skills received a great deal of comment; one child said:

'How can you possibly do anything proper if you can't read what he writes on the board'.

Secondly the children identified the specific skills of setting appropriate levels of achievement, interesting content to lessons, and punctual and appropriate feedback:

'You work hard all weekend doing homework and he never marks it'.

Classroom Climate

The younger children seemed more concerned with the physical layout and environment of the classroom and its contribution to a purposeful and exciting atmosphere:

'You feel good when the teacher puts your work on the wall'.

Good displays were the manifestation of the teachers encouragement and demonstrated success and esteem for the childrens' work. The encouragement to work in groups and the informal arrangements of tables emphasised the active pupil role:

'Working with your friends helps you when you can't do something and makes you want to get it right'.

The older children seemed to recognise this too but also were aware of how the teachers' demeanour, character, skills and abilities coloured the active life of the classroom:

‘Some teachers always look over your shoulder and never let you try it yourself’.

The response saw the effective classroom to be where the authority of the teacher to organise and manage learning activities was accepted by the children. There was a mutual respect and friendly rapport. The atmosphere of a happy classroom was characterised by purposefulness and confidence in the learning process.

The Teachers Relationships with Children

This category received the largest number of responses of all the variables. The children identified the teacher’s encouraging manner, fairness of relationships, good humour, patience and interest in individuals to be the most important components of the teacher’s skills in encouraging children to achieve their potential:

‘It is better when he explains it to you when you dont get it. We both laugh when he gets it wrong’.

It was also felt to be an important quality in a teacher when he showed interest and exhibited encouragement in situations outside the classroom:

‘I like it when my teacher stays after school to watch us play football. I think he must like to watch us if he stays so late’.

Lack of sensitivity and sarcastic or derogatory remarks were disliked because the children could not defend themselves or reply in kind without being rude or disrespectful:

‘When you dont know nothing he might say your stupid and I think so are you but I dont say it’.

Teacher Expectation

This category received a very small number of responses. In many ways this was to be expected as it was a hidden aspect of the teachers arsenal of skills. Clearly the expectation of the children must be related to their individual needs and must be encouraging as well as academically sound. Unfortunately, the underachieving child we have already seen table 2:1, page 32 was skilled at deception and difficult to diagnose. Many teachers did not concern themselves with children if they were tractable even if their abilities were not being extended. This led to boredom, irritation and eventually poor behaviour in an attempt by the child to attract attention:

‘You get bored when the work is too easy so I play on the computer’.

There was also a self-fulfilling prophecy at work - that if we expected the worst of children that is what we got:

‘He says I wont be able to do it so I dont try’.

(Table 7.2) Rank Order of Childrens

Perceptions as to the Influences on Achievement (Total Responses)

Teacher's relationships with the child

Child's relationships with others

Child' self concept

Relationships within the family

Material facilities

School discipline

Parental attitudes to school

Child behaviour

Classroom climate

Emotional disturbance within home

Specific learning difficulties

Family demands upon the child

Personal medical problems

Teacher's classroom skills

Teacher expectation

School organisation

School curriculum

School environment

When examining the responses to the research, it was clear that the child perceived the reactions of teachers to be important in encouraging the learning process. Children were motivated by the way in which the teacher managed the 'hidden' classroom curriculum of values and attitudes and responded positively when the teacher displayed a genuine interest and curiosity about what pupils said and thought. It was this quality of professional concern for individuals and the development of reciprocal liking and respect which seemed most valued by pupils.

The relationships the child developed with his peers and the status he enjoyed within the classroom was also perceived as an important influence on underachievement. Low attaining pupils were drawn to developing developed anti-school views and an anti-school 'counterculture' developed as a response to a feeling that their achievements were not valued. An effective classroom experience was perceived as one that provided continual support and encouragement so that failure, when it occurred was seen in itself to be a learning experience and did not undermine pupils self-esteem regarding their learning:

'When dignity is damaged, ones deepest experience is of being inferior, unable, and powerless. My argument is that our.....schools inflict such damage, in varying degrees on many of their pupils'. (Hargreaves, 1982).

Pupil Attitude to Learning

Connected with the notion of self-concept was an awareness of teachers expectations on pupils attitudes towards attainment. Too high an academic level of expected achievement was seen as leading to a continuous and debilitating failure whilst too low was seen as boring and encouraged the children to develop an inflated and erroneous attitude about their own abilities. The children made much of genuine and helpful feedback to their work. They

regarded rapid marking, positive comments, suggestions and a regard for the child's effort as good teaching qualities. The children also appreciated the opportunity to be given more control over their learning environment which enabled them to be more active in planning and conducting academic tasks and activities.

The four top ranked variables in the research represented 45% of the total responses:

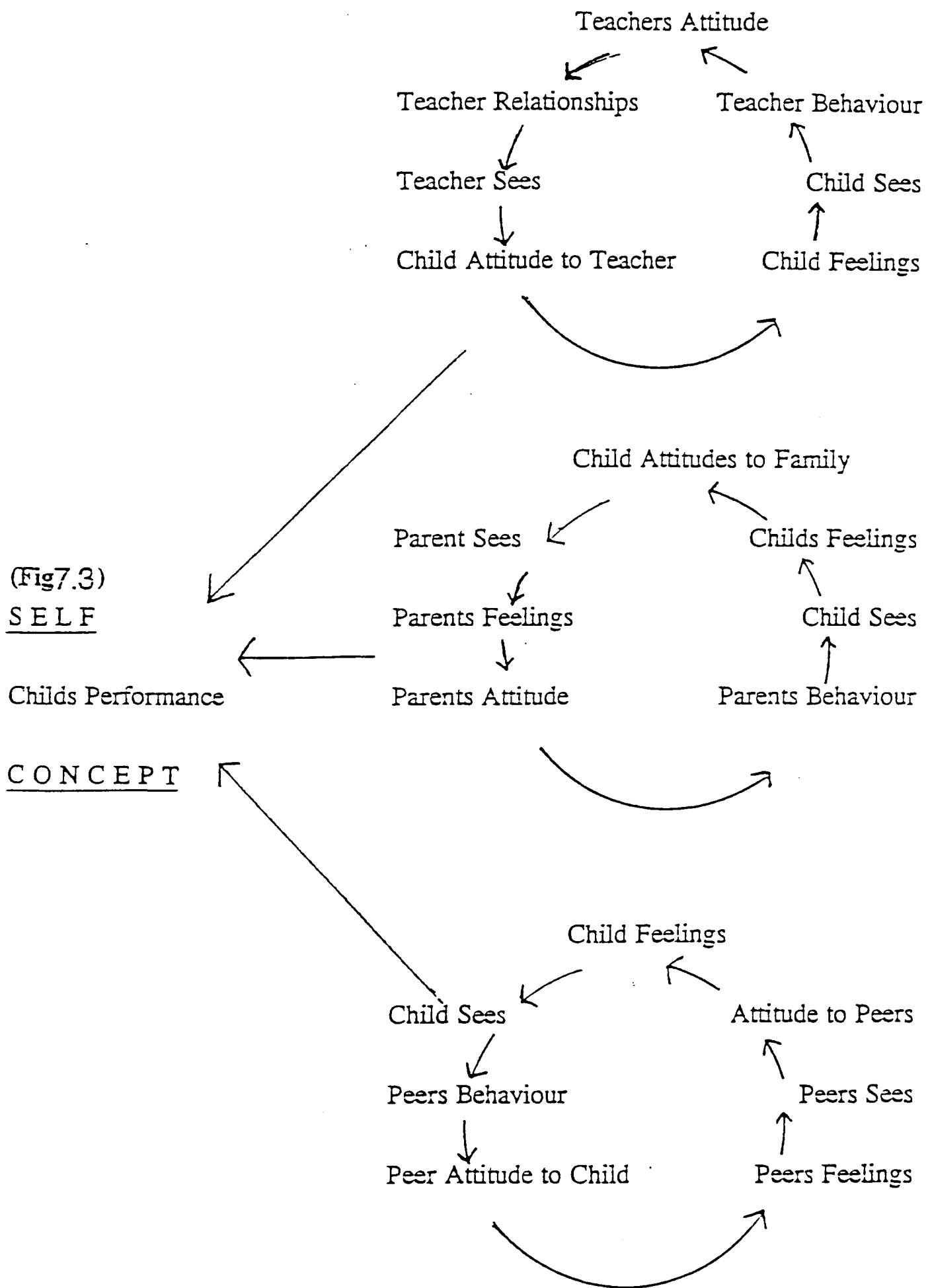
The teacher's relationships with the child

The child's relationships (with his peers)

The child's self-concept

The child's relationships within the family

and seemed to suggest that the child regarded his performance as the response to a series of overlapping circles of influence and were related to how he was valued in his environment.



(Table 7.4) Pupil Perception of the Influences on Achievement

An Analysis of Negative Responses

HOME

Parents not interested in School. Do not encourage child. Term time holidays. Do not support school trips or events. Lack of money. No room to work. Too many visitors. Not seeing estranged parent. Sharing bedroom with brother/sister. Parental arguments. Undeserved punishments. Arguments with neighbours. Trouble with police. Sibling rivalries. Parental illness. Looking after family when parents at work. Divorce and death in family. Strong parental attitudes.

TEACHER

Doesn't like children. No sense of humour. Embarrasses pupils in front of class. Interrupts and doesn't listen to ideas. Inconsistent discipline. Poor control. Short tempered and impatient. Fails to honour promises. Shows favouritism. Rude or inappropriate language. Sarcastic. Touches. Poor marking. Lack of lesson planning. Too complicated demands. Resources poorly prepared. Not noticing real effort. Classroom too noisy. Too much writing. Little encouragement. 'Hovering' when child is working.

SCHOOL

Too close to noisy classes. Too much teacher absence. Not involved in running of the school. Inability to avoid disliked teachers. Perceived irrelevance of some subjects. Not being trusted - use of toilets/lunchtime supervision/use of equipment. Only seeing headmaster when in trouble. Not being selected for school events/trips. Over use of supply and visiting teachers.

CHILD

Long term illness. Bullying. Awareness of constant failure. Peer pressure. Lack of confidence. Losing close friends. Not being valued by teachers. Unspecified moods/anxiety/stress. Trouble with police. Inability to concentrate. Misbehaviour. Losing temper. Teacher baiting. Classwork too difficult. Truancy - school phobia. Being 'picked on' by teacher.

(Table 7.5) Pupil Perception of the Influences on Achievement

An Analysis of Positive Responses

HOME

Help with homework. Lots of pocket money. Choosing own clothes. Having both parents at home. Rewards for good school reports. Getting your own room. Having a computer. Going to the library. Showing interest in school achievement.

SCHOOL

No rules. Plenty of clubs. Being in a small class. Having your own teacher all year. Having lots of space. No homework unless you need it.

TEACHER

Likes a laugh. Can be firm. Talks clearly. Explains things simply. Tells you again if you don't understand. Treats everyone the same. Tells you off privately. Doesn't shout. Notices when you try hard. Trusts you when you go out of class. Listens when you want to say something. Keeps his word. Isn't 'sarky'. Marks your work straight away. Gives lots of choices. Gives you a second chance.

CHILD

Being liked. Having lots of friends. Working with friends. Having a laugh. Able to talk. Being chosen by other children. Not being bullied. Being good at games: in teams. Being made group leader. Getting good marks. Having work on the wall. Being made a librarian.

Childs Perspective on Achievement:

(Table 7.6) Positive and Negative Influences

	NEGATIVE %	POSITIVE %
HOME		
Parental Attitudes to School	8	10
Family Relationships	9	6
Material Facilities	7	1
Emotional Disturbance	11	0
Demands on the Child	7	2
	42	19
CHILD		
Specific Learning Difficulties	5	0
Medical Problems	5	0
Social Relationships	9	16
Behaviour	4	7
Self-Concept	6	10
	29	33
SCHOOL		
Environment	1	5
Organisation	0	6
Curriculum	1	4
Discipline	2	2
	4	17
TEACHER		
Skills	2	7
Classroom Climate	3	8
Relationship with Children	18	10
Expectation	1	5
	24	30

(Table 7.7) Rank Order of Positive and Negative Responses

POSITIVE	%	%	NEGATIVE	
Childs Social Relationships	16	18	Teachers Relationship with Child	
Teachers Relationship with Child	10	11	Emotional Disturbance	
Childs Self-Concept	10	9	Childs Family Relationships	
Parental Attitudes to School	10	9	Childs Social Relationships	
Classroom Climate	8	8	Parental Attitudes to School	
Childs Behaviour	7	7	Material Facilities	
Teachers Skills	7	7	Demands Upon the Child	
School Organisation	6	6	Childs Self Concept	
Childs Family Relationships	6	5	Specific Learning Difficulties	
School Environment	5	5	Medical Problems	
Teacher Expectation	5	4	Child Behaviour	
School Curriculum	4	3	Classroom Climate	
School Discipline	2	2	Teachers Skills	
Demands Upon the Child	2	2	School Discipline	
Material Facilities	1	1	School Curriculum	
Medical Problems	0	1	School Environment	
Emotional Disturbance	0	1	Teacher Expectation	
Specific Learning Difficulties	0	0	School Organisation	
Total Responses	141		Total Responses	324

Comment

It is clear from the evidence that children consider the school to be a strongly positive influence in their lives, whilst the home is seen principally as representing negative influences. Of most importance to the children seems to be the way in which others value them as individuals and the relationship developed between teacher and child.

The data also suggests that the background that the children come from, linguistically and socially deprived, has a negative influence upon underachievement, but that a positive and encouraging learning environment can influence change. In this way changes in school organisation and administration may cause significant improvements in behaviour and achievement as the school seeks to respond to the needs of the child.

The skills of the teacher in the development of relationships with the child are of particular importance. The child clearly sees these relationships as potential forces for influencing positive or negative achievements. Children see themselves as underachieving if their efforts are not valued and the learning environment is not encouraging and stress-free. Further encouragement is perceived as coming from parental support.

Chapter 8

TEACHERS PERSPECTIVE ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Introduction

The investigation to ascertain the teacher's views on the causes of underachievement took the form of two surveys:

1. 'What ways can the School Curriculum have an influence upon underachievement?' (December 1988)
2. 'What six elements of Teacher Behaviour do you think would influence childrens' achievement?' (November 1989)

The research initiatives implemented to date had focused the teacher's attention primarily upon the child, the home and upon the teacher's skills. There was a vigorous cross-fertilisation of ideas and opinions generated by these tasks. The panels consisted of the specialist subject teams involving the head of department and at least one representative of each year. The whole staff of 14 were involved in various combinations and some staff opted to be involved in more than one group. The representatives reported back to their year groups and the heads of department to the full staff meeting. There were no restrictions as to the number of responses that could be made.

Number of Staff	=	14
Number of responses	=	121

(December 1988)

In coding the responses I attempted to establish a continuity of approach. I had already restricted the brief in the wording of the task - this being related to the common coding approach established from the literature review - so I immersed myself in the responses and allowed the coding to develop from the perceptions of the teachers. Whereas the childrens' responses had generally been confined to one point made in each response, the teachers responses tended to be more complex. This was a problem initially but which I decided to solve by counting the number of points in each response and coding them individually.

What Ways Can The School Curriculum Have An Influence Upon

(Table 8.1) Underachievement?

% age Rank Order

Item	%
Specialist teaching	23
Resources	19
Mixed ability teaching	19
Special needs	12
Cross-subject initiatives	12
Timetabling	4
Union activity	4
Cross-phase liaison	4

Number of staff = 14

Number of responses = 121

(December 1988)

Analysis of Responses

Specialist Teaching

23% of the total responses identified problems associated with the attempt to service specialist teaching as being directly related to the childrens' underachievement. This related to the problems of employing specialist teachers within the constraints of a diminishing school roll:

‘As the school numbers have dropped it has often proved impossible to replace staff who leave. Even Heads of Department haven't been replaced’. (Year 4, December 1988)

This made it difficult for the level of expertise to be maintained and for skills and concepts to be identified and matched to the needs of the children:

‘Some curriculum documents have not been revised in years and themes are serviced by materials developed a long time ago. Some are dated and others rather tatty’. (Year 4, December 1988)

The number of specialist subjects taught within the school have increased to include computer studies and information technology both of which are expensive to resource and placed an increasing demand on diminishing financial resources:

‘English has not received an increase in its resource allowance since 1984 in spite of the fact that one set of dictionaries now represents one third of the subject allowance’. (Year 4, December 1988)

This comment was relevant to other subjects but was more pertinent to those that were heavily reliant upon book-based resources. When replacing staff there was an increasing pressure to look for general subject teachers with wide experience of teaching across the age

range rather than subject specialists. This enabled there to be the maximum possible flexibility in staffing but restricted the possibility of subject resourcing:

‘Humanities does not have one specialist teacher’.
(Staff Meeting October 1988)

This also had implications for the increasing stress levels on individual teachers. The tendency is for able and enthusiastic teachers to be given more and more responsibility - often even a number of important subject responsibilities:

‘Mike is Head of Mathematics, Head of Science, Head of House and involved in organising computer studies. If you work hard it seems more is expected of you!’ (Staff Meeting, October 1988)

The gap between hard working, enthusiastic teachers and the ‘9 - 4’ teachers is a potential source of stress and conflict. A number of positive strategies were identified by the group to combat this:

‘Self-help strategies for training on the job could be started. Team teaching could best utilise the services of single specialists and encourage individual worth’. (Staff Meeting, October 1988)

The importance of providing a continuous assessment of childrens’ needs and a record of experience were articulated as important pre-requisites of a well formed specialist curriculum.

Cross-phase liaison was considered as crucial to this process:

‘It is important to know what topics had been covered by the children and to build on the skills and concepts already learned’. (Second Year Team, November 1988)

In a small school with diminishing human and material resources some responses referred to the efficient use of specialists through cross-phase movement of staff, the creation of a local

'pool' of subject staff to act as consultants and the development of local curriculum design and assessment panels based on the area liaison teams. This is particularly relevant where there is a pyramid of associated schools servicing an area over a relatively small locality:

'19% of the responses referred to the raising of funds and the targeting of resources'.

Resources

As a small school becoming smaller the demand upon resources is at crisis level:

'Changing a Reading or Mathematics scheme or developing Computer learning to name but a few, have to vie for each other on a priority list. Consequently, it may be years before a subject initiative can be implemented. By this time it is probably out of date'. (1st Year Meeting, February 1989)

The pressure is to try and maintain the status quo rather than to embrace change and redefine the parameters in which teachers are working. Some responses refer to the way in which resources are shared and the method of decision making which is adopted by the management team:

'It would be so much more encouraging for teachers if we felt that our opinions and skills were valued and that we had any real influence upon the decision making process'. (Staff Meeting, October 1988)

It was suggested that a more positive and less autocratic process could be developed to utilise the internal expertise of subject and pastoral leaders in the targeting of resources. Further, the local pooling of resources across the phases - the use of a minibus, science and technology equipment, printing facilities - could reduce costs and improve liaison. Unfortunately, schools seem to develop a negative force which works against change:

‘Teachers seem to be suspicious of any attempt to change or redefine their responsibilities. In particular they develop an ownership of equipment and materials and tend to resist sharing’. (Campus Heads Meetings, January 1989)

It was suggested that this reaction was prompted by an unconscious attempt to maintain personal standards in the face of increasing professional stress and to retain control of diminishing resources. A number of responses referred to the ways in which schools could increase resources through developing fund raising activities, encouraging sponsorship and community use of the school facilities:

‘The school buildings, equipment and grounds lie fallow for most evenings. Even during the day much of the playing area is unused’. (Management Meeting, December 1988)

On less controversial lines many comments referred to the levels and types of resourcing demanded by different subjects. It was suggested that subjects like Physical Education, Music and Computer Studies required a much greater initial capital outlay but comparatively small servicing costs whilst Science, Art, Crafts resources needed replenishing annually. Further, academic subjects that relied on printed materials faced continuous pressure on resources. The tendency to continue to use books and resources that were worn, out-of-date or unexciting, influenced the way in which children perceived a subject and responded to the learning process:

‘I am constantly finding books with missing pages but I have to make do with what I’ve got as there doesn’t seem to be any alternative. Children are just not motivated by these resources’. (1st Year Meeting, October 1988)

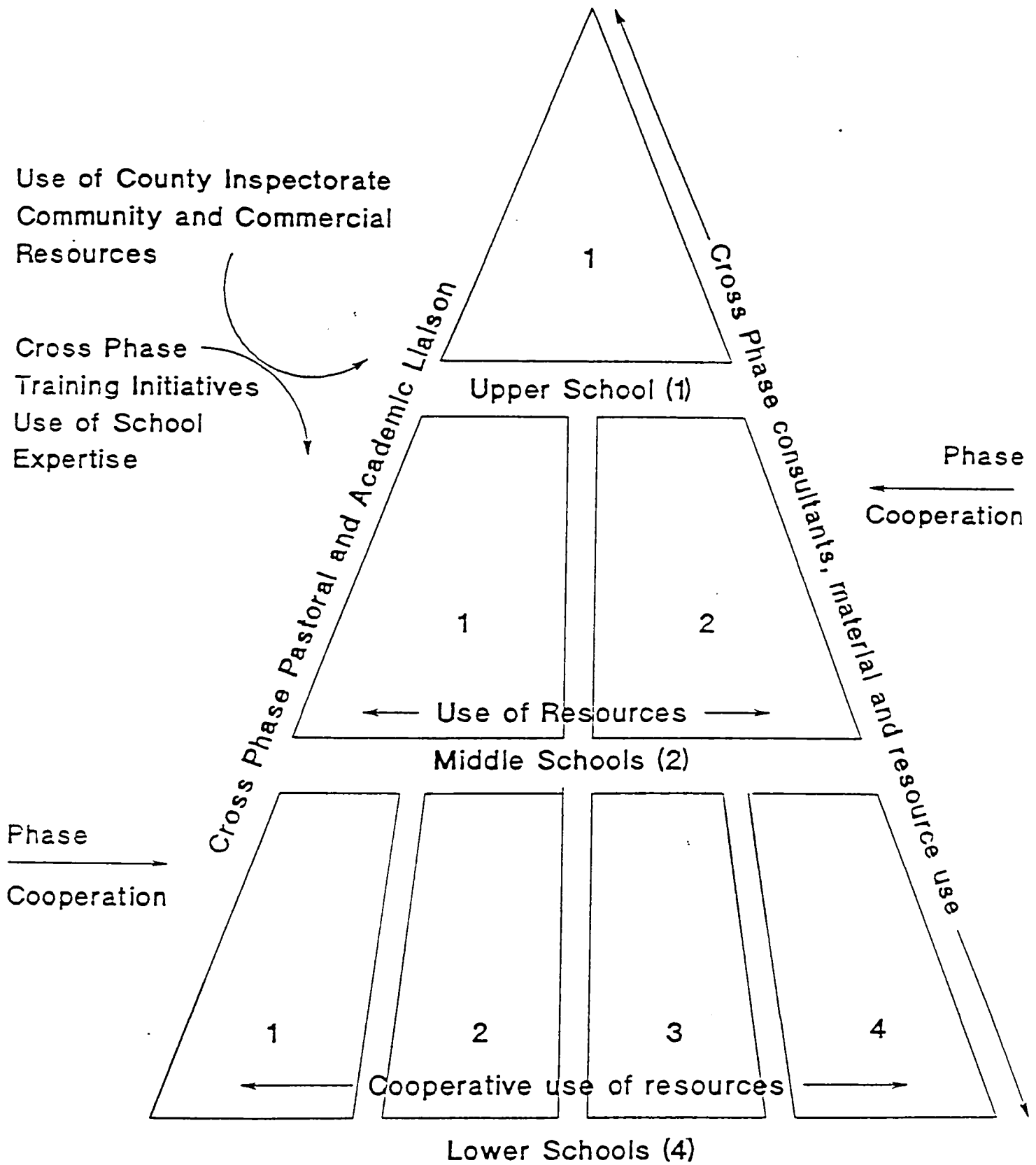
There seemed to be a consensus of opinion that perceived the learning situation as being encouraged by the variety and quality of audio-visual resources, the quality of materials available and the availability of equipment, materials and specialist staff. Teachers were

being increasingly thrown on to their own resources to produce lesson materials. Some responses referred to the way in which national initiatives had diverted teachers time and energy into raising money, selling the schools and creating an image in order to attract funds and clients - and to buy essential equipment:

‘It is demoralising when you run out of exercise books after two terms and there is no paper for displays’. (1st Year Meeting, October 1988)

It was also pointed out that raising funds to support school resourcing was difficult in a school which serviced an area of severe economic depression with many of families on income support. Inner-city schools were also not generally good propositions for attracting funds from industry. It was therefore concluded that maximum use should be made of local resources, both human and material, between schools:-

(Figure 8.2) Cooperative Use of Resources



In particular expensive resources could be pooled. The Upper School printing facilities could be better utilised for instance, as could computers and software. Science and Technology offers abundant opportunities for rationalisation. Opportunities for cross-phase movement also provides possibilities for staff personal development, improved liaison and economic use of resources.

Mixed Ability Teaching

19% of responses referred to this variable as influencing underachievement. The vast majority considered that the benefits of mixed ability teaching were eroded by large classes and the disproportionate number of low attainers in their classes:

‘It is difficult to develop individual course of study for children when the classes exceed 30 and the class does not represent a fair range of intellectual ability’. (Second Year Team, October 1988)

In particular, the large number of children requiring special attention put a strain on resources and was demanding on the teacher’s time. It was seen as crucial to develop cooperative strategies in order to prevent teachers from becoming isolated within the classroom:

‘We identified four areas that we could develop:

1. centralised year resources and the cooperative sharing of teaching ideas;
2. team teaching to utilise specialisms and enable special needs help to be available;
3. corporate agreement on behavioural standards and discipline and team approach to development;

4. the integrated day to encourage individual endeavour and involve the child more in the planning and execution of his own education'. (Second Year Team, October 1988)

The social aspects of mixed ability teaching become increasingly difficult to manage as the numbers of behavioural problems within a large class reach crisis proportions. The teacher is often forced to adopt isolating strategies in order to preserve the integrity of the majority of his class and is aware of certain children representing a threat about to happen:

'For my own peace of mind and for the benefit of other children I have to admit that I have failed with some children'. (Special Needs Meeting, October 1988)

There was also a consensus of opinion which doubted the value of mixed ability teaching within large classes. The constant pressure on resources, organisation, administration and discipline were all mentioned as contributing to increased stress in teaching. Tutors were also aware of the tendency to pitch teaching levels too low in order to try and encourage the majority of children. The consequence being that children of high ability may not be extended. The higher proportion of boys in most classes were also cited as an influence on poor achievement.

Special Needs

12% of the responses mentioned this variable as influencing underachievement. The disproportionate numbers of children requiring individual support meant that a large amount of the teachers time was spent in identifying problems, producing resources, and recording progress. This was at the expense of less demanding children who were often encouraged to

follow computer generated tasks, language schemes or personal interests in order to create time for the teacher. Teachers were aware of their personal lack of expertise:

‘The Warnock Report makes us all experts in Special Needs overnight and removed our specialist support within the classroom’. (Special Needs Group, January 1989)

and the increased demands that this made on time and energy. The most difficult pupils mentioned were these with multiple social, academic and behavioural problems:

‘I never know when she is going to become violent and destroy her books, it can happen at any time for the most trivial of reasons. At that moment she is uncontrollable and a danger to herself and others’. (Special Needs Group, February 1989)

These children require constant attention and encouragement and are capable of destroying the purposeful atmosphere of the classroom for other pupils. Internal training schemes and corporate teaching strategies were mentioned as doing much to reduce isolation and develop personal skills, but large classes, the demands of special needs and mixed ability teaching were seen as compounding the problem of increasing teacher stress. This often resulted in the teachers impatience or diminished sense of humour:

‘I know that I am being unreasonable sometimes, but I need occasionally to distance myself from her constant demand for my personal attention’. (Special Needs Group, February 1989)

The teacher is therefore placed in a classical dilemma. They feel guilty if they develop coping strategies which tend to reject the child, and guilt for not being able to provide time and support for the less demanding children who consequently tend to underachieve.

Cross-Subject Initiatives

12% of responses. The development of these initiatives were seen as evolving from the best of intentions and motivated by good practice. Artificial subject barriers were breached and children encouraged to transfer learning from one situation to solve problems in another:

‘The use of computer generated tasks revitalised my teaching of map work’.
(Second Year Humanities, February 1989)

Teachers were also encouraged to develop cooperative strategies for teaching and for the production of resources:

‘Certainly, having access to the ideas and methods of other teachers improved my delivery of the subject’. (Third Year Maths Meeting, October 1988)

There was also greater pupil mobility between groups and classes which encouraged the sharing of ideas and expertise:

‘I was surprised to see Donald, who is an isolate in my class, involved in animated and serious discussion in the other classroom’. (Third Year Maths Meeting, October 1988)

The danger of these initiatives were seen as being externally imposed and being unrelated to the specific needs of the children. When this complaint was examined further, teachers identified the implementation of initiatives without adequate planning, lack of provision for evaluation and inadequate resourcing as the most frequently occurring weaknesses. These made it difficult for materials to be matched to childrens’ abilities and for realistic targets to be set to stretch childrens’ achievements. The result of this was too often children were either bored because they found the demands too easily achievable, or irritable and intractable because the work was too difficult. Mixed ability teaching seemed to compound these problems when classes were large.

Timetabling

4% of the total responses. It was noted that children in the middle school seemed to have greater powers of concentration and perseverance in the mornings when the most qualitative learning took place. This was especially noticeable with the younger children. Creative timetabling could utilise this observation and encourage the implementation of corporate teaching strategies and the efficient use of specialists. The development of afternoon plans involving leisure activities - art, games, music, drama, listening to stories, could be utilised to occur when children were at their most anxious. Long break times and lunches were often followed by poor behaviour and it was counter-productive to timetable a lesson requiring concentration and application after one which encouraged boisterous and physical activity, a quiet reading lesson should not follow games for instance.

Union Activity

4% of responses. During the period of the research teachers had been instructed to 'work to rule'. As the majority of classroom preparation, production of resources and marking or assessment were accomplished outside the teaching day much of this was reduced to the minimum. The teachers saw this as a necessary method of demonstrating their determination but acknowledged that the action simply made their working lives more stressful:

'How can we hope to encourage the children if we show little interest in constructive marking and reduce it to the minimum?' (Staff Meeting, November 1989)

It was felt that the reduced activity of teachers would be perceived by the children as demonstrating a personal disinterest in them as individuals and would lead to underachievement and poor behaviour.

Cross-Phase Liaison

4% of the total responses referred to this variable. Concern was expressed in the specific problems faced by middle school in the implementation of the National Curriculum. In particular the way in which key stages 2 and 3 crossed the phases such that the middle school did not have complete control over what was taught in either stage:

‘We need to be involved in the planning of courses in both upper and lower schools in order to provide continuity in the child's education’. (Management Meeting, September 1988)

It was also felt that the development of cross-phase initiatives that share resources and pooled expertise would encourage achievement. Cross-phase movement would also minimise pupil trauma experienced at 9+ and 12+ and encourage staff to identify and plan for the social and personal needs of children:

‘The worst time is the first half-term when children are learning how to behave in their new school, establishing their role within the class and getting to know their teacher. This could be minimised if the children had already had regular contact with the school and teachers’. (First Year Meeting, October 1988)

The curriculum initiatives also required accurate and qualitative recording to occur which enabled the individual needs of children to be analysed. With the tendency of teachers to be unwilling to record personal details concerning children and their background it was a concern that liaison should enable serious social and behavioural information to be shared. This would enable teachers to utilise existing contacts with other professionals and the home, be aware of action already taken and develop strategies that built on the experience of others.

It was also noted that liaison meetings were generally convened outside the school day and reduction in the time spent in this area would seriously interfere with the efficiency of school management and organisation and allow children to avoid early diagnosis of need:

‘The cross-phase reduction in information about Special Needs requirements, behavioural problems and curriculum development, meant that children were often not diagnosed as being in need until the second term’. (Special Needs, January 1989)

By this time some children were already bored and developing anti-school attitudes and poor behavioural and social traits which were difficult to modify once they were established. Some responses referred to the decline in training and in-service opportunities and the increasing feelings of isolation and frustration. Poor teacher morale influenced the attitudes, activities and relationships within the classroom and therefore the teacher’s expectation of the child’s achievements:

‘It is difficult to maintain your professionalism when all in authority seem to devalue your efforts and undermine your authority’. (Third Year Meeting, 198)

The teachers also identified the reduction of extracurricular activities, field courses and visits as contributing to childrens’ underachievement. It was felt that a number of crucial encouraging activities were interrupted that:

1. reinforced positive relationships between the child and his peers/teachers;
2. developed and valued the child’s abilities rather than concentrating on his disabilities;
3. encouraged the child to identify an ‘ownership’ with the ethos of the school’.

(Staff Meeting, December 1988)

It was noted that this variable was transitory in nature but that it illustrated the important contribution to the child's development encouraged by extracurricular activities, field courses and educational visits.

Curriculum Influence on Underachievement

(Table 8.3) (an analysis of teacher comments)

Cost of print and book resources
Age and condition of learning material
Variety of audio-visual materials
Number and disposition of computers
Variety of computer programmes
'Pooling' of resources across schools
Availability of expertise through specialist teachers
Cross-curriculum initiatives
Mixed ability teaching - socialisation
Team teaching providing a variety of learning experiences
Cross-phase liaison - developing curriculum continuity
Levels of responsibility (Stress)
Creative timetabling
Qualitative recording, assessment and evaluation
In-service training
Individual learning packages
Influence of the 'hidden' curriculum
Visits and field trips - practical experience
Special needs provision

What six elements of Teacher Behaviour do you think would influence childrens' achievement?

This question was posed towards the end of the research period - November 1989. The staff had been involved in a variety of tasks designed to raise their awareness of the problems related to underachievement and in spite of the attempt to focus the sampling on a specific aspect of underachievement they chose to interpret this task in a much broader way - looking also at the influences of teacher attitude, skills and organisation on childrens' underachievement. It may be that the excitement of successful collaborative research in a field identified as having positive benefits for the professional development of individual staff was threatening to take over. Certainly, a change in attitude was evident amongst the staff. Initially, there had been considerable interest in the research project but the focus had been principally on identifying the negative aspects of childrens' underachievement - parental influences, peer group pressures, environmental influences and poor personal behaviour. There had been a tacit initial agreement that underachievement was largely the result of factors outside the immediate influence of teachers and therefore difficult to effect lasting change and seems to deny teacher responsibility for underachievement.

This survey displays a positive and professional acceptance of the responsibility for developing strategies to combat underachievement and an understanding of the methods that can be employed to improve classroom conditions and illustrates the change in attitude that has occurred during the research process.

In coding the responses I was influenced by the approach suggested in the literature review and which formed the basis of a common coding framework throughout the research.

However, though I had sought to restrict the task to six responses in order to focus attention upon major issues, the staff chose to ignore this injunction entirely and concentrated on the ways in which teachers could influence achievement within the classroom.

Number of Staff 14

Number of Responses 196

(November 1989)

The responses were coded by numbers so that the staff would not be able to be identified and that information was treated as confidential. The task was designed to elicit the individual and personal responses of teachers and although some discussion was inevitable in the process of articulating perceptions this was an individual attempt to clarify ideas rather than a group process of reaching compromises. In this way the power structure of group dynamics was circumvented and equal weight given to the individual responses of all staff enabling a 'true' sampling to occur.

What Six Elements of Teacher Behaviour Do You Think Would Influence

(Table 8.4) Childrens' Achievement?

% age Results in Rank Order

Item	%
Teacher skills	43
Teacher relationships with children	19
Attitudes	12
Classroom Organisation	11
Classroom Climate	9
Liaison	6

Number of Staff 14

Number of Responses 196

(November, 1987)

Teacher Skills

43% of the total responses identified teacher skills as being an important influence on childrens' achievement. The ability to create an interesting and lively learning environment was seen as crucial in encouraging high levels of achievement. In order to do this teachers articulated the desire to create opportunities for sharing teaching ideas and developing personal skills:

'In team teaching we were able to share the burden of producing resources and to collaborate in the organisation and discipline of the classroom. We were able to learn from subject specialists and from the organisational skills of experienced teachers'. (Minutes of Second Year Meeting, November 1988)

It was felt that in-service training should be based on the classroom and related to the needs of the teacher and the school through collaborative initiatives like team-teaching, cross-curricular initiatives, the integrated day or vertical streaming. It is interesting to note that no responses referred to teacher training being related to the needs of the children, though to be fair teachers may have regarded this as implicit in their other responses. Small groups were identified as an important tool for encouraging high levels of achievement and the opportunity to create time for one-to-one teaching for Special Needs was considered important if children with learning difficulties were not to become frustrated and isolated.

Many responses referred to the feeling by some teachers that they did not have the knowledge to identify specific learning difficulties or to develop individual learning packages for children with special needs.

The using of the special needs coordinator as a full-time class teacher was cited as an example of the diminishing access to expertise available to teachers. This influenced the teacher's ability to devise a variety of social and learning environments for underachieving children with learning difficulties, to produce materials that stretched children but which offered opportunities for success and to identify and resource special learning difficulties:

'There are so many problems in each class that it is sometimes difficult to know where to start'. (Minutes of Second Year Meeting, November 1988)

Teachers Relationships with Children

19% of responses were related to the way in which teachers responded to the social needs of children. It was felt crucial that the teacher should be consistent with discipline and develop an encouraging and positive classroom atmosphere. However, it was recognised that this was

difficult to do with disruptive and aggressive children as sometimes the teacher had to consider the needs of the whole class rather than those of the individual.

The teachers felt it was important to get to know individual children, their interests and skills. It was also felt important to find time to talk to all children on a social level - that is without a specific educational purpose. A number of responses cited the value of avoiding sarcasm and favouritism within the classroom and the positive aspects of smiling rather than frowning, encouraging rather than censoring and praising rather than denigrating. Some teachers revealed that increasing isolation and curriculum pressure encouraged a more traditionally autocratic teaching style. Increasing stress was also cited as an influence upon patience.

Teachers Attitudes to Children

12% of responses referred to the teachers attitude as being an influencing factor in childrens' achievement. The way in which the teacher responded to children with behavioural or educational difficulties was said to influence the work of effective learners. Sub-linguistic signals were sent which indicated the teacher's values concerning individual children. Further, the way the teacher responded to childrens' behaviour and the interest shown in valuing childrens' opinions and ideas had an influence on achievement. An open-minded response to new ideas was likely to encourage the children to explore, match and compare their own ideas, whilst a narrow and prescriptive view was likely to enhance failure and the negative aspects of learning situations.

Classroom Organisation

11% of responses targeted the influence of classroom organisation as important to childrens' achievement. Informal friendship groupings in mixed ability classes encouraged positive groups which worked well together:

'Children like working with their friends and a surprising number of groups contained both boys and girls'. (Minutes of Second Year Meeting, November 1988)

The classroom should also contain a number of learning areas for both individual and group activities. Books should be freely available and valued as resources for information and enjoyment. Cross-curricular activities provided opportunities for combining with other classes and using the expertise of specialist teachers. Personal and private places should be provided for childrens' use and the teacher's views on tidiness and cleanliness clearly explained. A pride in self and group should be encouraged and small improvements in behaviour or achievement should be praised.

Classroom Climate

This was referred to by 9% of the responses. In many ways this response overlapped with a number of others. It was concerned with the interest, excitement and enjoyment in learning that the teacher was able to create in the classroom. This was achieved by matching resources to abilities and whilst stretching the imagination and abilities of the children, still enabling them to achieve success. If failure occurred the teacher needed to encourage the children to see this as a necessary step in the learning process. The classroom should be light and airy,

with space to move about and quiet areas to study or read. Childrens' work should be displayed in a variety of ways, and wall mounted material should be changing constantly.

Liaison

6% of the total responses mentioned liaison. Developing and maintaining good lines of communication across the phases encouraged curriculum continuity and improved knowledge concerning childrens' abilities. It also minimised the development of inter-school rivalries and reduced the stress felt by children when changing schools. Childrens' records were better kept and information was of a higher quality, thus enabling individual learning needs to be resourced, when liaison was good.

Parental liaison needed to provide opportunities for parents and teachers to meet socially so that personal relationships could erode the institutional barriers that prevented the free exchange of ideas. Parents should be encouraged to take an active part in the running of the school and shown that their opinions and ideas were valued.

**Managing Underachievers in the Classroom;
(Table 8.5) an analysis of teacher comments**

Avoid frustration

Avoid sarcasm and 'talking down' to children

Do not over-react. Smile rather than frown

Praise even small successes

Explain own values and try to be consistent

Even under pressure treat all children the same

Respond patiently to the problems of individual children. Respect childrens' opinions

Display interest and talk to children about their work

Be aware of potential confrontations - develop defusing strategies

Answer questions honestly - encourage freedom and independence of thought

Admit your own lack of knowledge - respond positively

Be self-critical and assess effectiveness constantly

Seek advice from others - involve yourself in collaborative teaching strategies

Be versatile in your teaching approach

Match resources to ability and interest levels

Prepare a variety of supplementary materials to extend and stretch

Provide open-ended tasks to encourage personal/group research

Encourage children to set goals

Require children/groups to report back on their progress

Prepare introductory lessons thoroughly - use a variety of audio-visual resources

Keep children integrated and try to minimise negative peer group pressure

Prevent children from becoming isolated

Give responsibilities within the group and class

Encourage frequent teacher contact

Keep children consistently occupied

Reward improvement

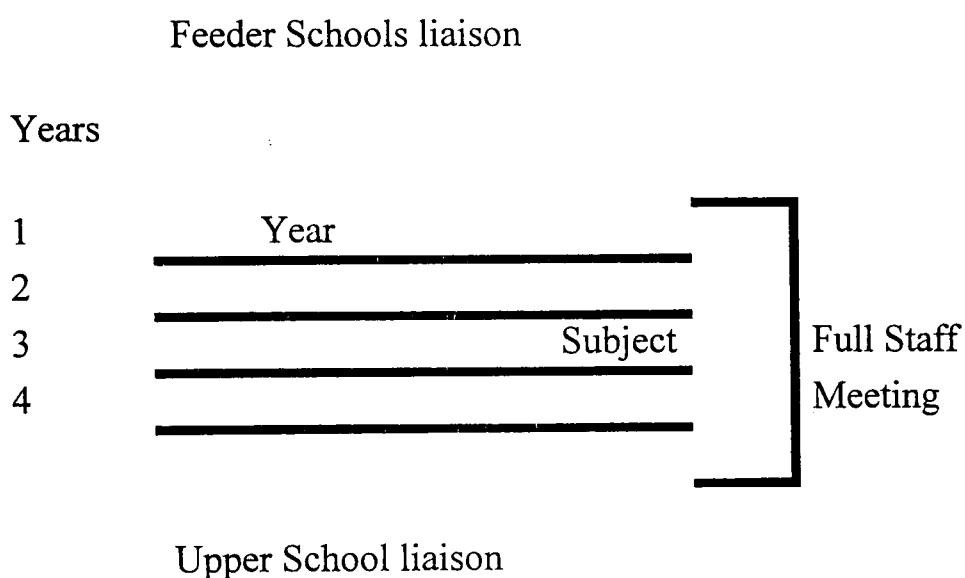
Display work

Mark work and record progress

Develop informal communication with families

Know about the background and experience of children

By using the existing system of meetings I intended to minimise the perception that teachers had of change being imposed and concentrate on the idea that it was within their own control. This was designed to enable teachers to identify personally with the aims and goals of the research. Horizontal year groups and vertical subject groups were already in existence but tended to have separate and different purposes. These were reorganised by the teachers as a result of the research process.



In this way a cross-fertilisation of ideas was encouraged and all staff were involved in a number of different groupings. Further, modification to external systems began to occur, such that there was less isolated effort.

In order to provide a record of events, a commitment to providing accurate minutes was taken and the minutes made available in the staffroom. This also provided me with a valuable source of material describing the process from the point of view of the participants.

How Teachers Were Involved in Change

The teachers were already aware of the existence of underachievement within the school as a result of empirical evidence. They were, however unable to identify or quantify the nature and extent of the problem. As a function of this research was to create change, it was necessary to engage teachers in the process of observing, identifying and evaluating.

The simple act of providing a purpose and a format for collaborative study, focused the teachers attention on underachievement and the development of classroom based environments for study placed the research within real settings. This enabled the teachers to conceive of the study as being of practical value and related to specific need. The action of studying people was, in itself, a cause of change. The teacher was engaged in observation, discussion, evaluation and recording. He was questioning the existing processes and seeking alternative answers. This fertile collaborative situation resulted in constant modification of ideas, attitudes and relationships.

The strategies implemented to elicit childrens' views on underachievement through dramatic role play, enabled the teacher to see underachieving children in a different light and to understand some of the pressures and stresses that children experienced. This led to:

1. the increased use of team-teaching;
2. the development of a year-based counselling system;
3. the greater involvement of children in their own education through the integrated day;
4. cooperative resource development.

Early in the research process, teachers identified behaviour as being related to underachievement and requested in-service courses to provide training in observational techniques, identification of problem behaviour and methods of recording. Two courses were arranged in conjunction with the educational psychologist. They were organised as 'workshops' based on the classroom in order to target the specific concerns of the teachers.

1. Teaching Difficult Children (1987)
2. Behaviour Modification (1988)

This led to more formal training for the 9+ and 10+ year staff and the use of the Stott BSAG test used in the correlation of underachievement and behaviour. Teachers testified to being more confident with difficult children and more able to seek advice. There developed a continuous process of negotiation between myself as researcher, and the teachers as participants which influenced the way in which the research developed and change became a constant response to understanding through observation, collaborative cross-fertilisation of ideas and organisational modification.

The development of team teaching strategies encouraged the sharing of resources and cooperative organisation which made the best use of individual expertise. Teachers admitted to feeling less isolated and less concerned about discipline, in spite of initial misgivings.

Two members of staff attended the county in-service course on counselling, (1989) as a result of interest engendered by the research initiatives. This led to the development of community programmes to improve the local perception of the school, and social activities to diminish the gap between parent and teacher.

Chapter 9

SUMMARY, EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter will summarise the main findings as set out in the 'data' chapters and evaluate what has been learnt about underachievement in the Middle School. In the process of doing this it will also compare and contrast the perspectives of children, teachers and parents, identify key questions and emerging issues, and draw broad conclusions as to the nature of underachievement as revealed by the research.

The chapter will also contain my reflections on how the research was accomplished, how it might have been done more effectively and how it is possible to draw out the implications and recommendations:

1. for teachers;
2. for schools;
3. for school managers;
4. for further research.

I shall also, in an attempt to make sense of this data, bring in my own experience and the experience of teachers as recorded in the minutes of meetings.

Identification of School Levels of Underachievement

By applying the measure of underachievement (I.Q. minus achievement scores) to the school population it was found that the school intake at 9+ represented an anomalous selection of the total local population. Whilst there were no significant differences in I.Q. scores for the school, local and national populations, the school scored consistently below the local and

national populations on achievement scores. With regard to underachievement, as defined, this meant that 43% of the school population were underachieving, with no significant differences noted between boys and girls. This high measure had remained consistent over ten years. Further, the majority of these children were in the average to above average categories of intelligence and may therefore reasonably be expected to be capable of more improvement in achievement than the genuine 'slow learners'. This suggests that intervention has a genuine chance of improving achievement levels in the school.

The teacher comments in the survey of teachers' views on underachievement and collected from the minutes of staff meetings, suggested that the major factor influencing underachievement in the school was perceived as linguistic deprivation resulting from the social and cultural problems of inner-city children. This was an attractive argument for teachers in that it placed the responsibility for underachievement in the home and articulated the belief that the basic influencing factors were out of the reach of teachers and could not be effectively modified. To accept that schools can have little influence on the child's social and cultural background and therefore on achievement has serious implications for expectation. If teachers have a low expectation of children, both children and teachers indicated in the research that there is an excellent chance that teachers will be reinforcing poor language achievement. As a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy children will tend to achieve what is expected of them - especially if it is low expectation. However, the research using the 7+ test records indicated that the total local population was only marginally below the national achievement levels and therefore social and cultural influences could not be the sole factors in influencing the level of school achievement.

What seems to be the crucial difference between the total local levels of achievement and those of the research school relate to the evidence of 'creaming' at 9+. An examination of the 7+ records indicates that the school intake contains an abnormally high proportion of underachievers which remained consistent over ten years (Figure 4.5). Further, of those children allocated places to the school, there was an increasing number of parents who refused to take up the offer and sent their children to other schools. This number rose from 20% of the total 9+ intake in 1979 to 36% by 1988. A matching of these children against the 7+ test results suggest that very few of these children were underachievers. Lower school liaison and information from the Education Welfare Officer indicates that this loss of the higher achieving children may be related to the image that the school has within the community.

Lower school liaison and county panel meetings revealed that the school had a reputation locally for dealing effectively with special needs problems and difficult children. This had tended to attract parents whose children require this type of expertise and who viewed the school as being responsive to their needs and supportive in their difficulties.

In my role as pastoral manager, my interviews with parents who wished to send their children elsewhere revealed that many saw the school as responsive and caring but perceived the school as not being concerned with high academic standards or high levels of achievement.

These perceptions are reinforced by an examination of the significant transitory population (Figure 4.1). In most cases children who arrive late (13% of the school population) have been expelled from other schools for serious behavioural disorders. The 2% who leave are

predominantly good achievers. The inference seems to be that the school is effective with 'problem' children but has a low priority for academic excellence.

The effect of this transitory population seems to have two major influences on underachievement within the school. The first, from the comments made by staff, is the immediate and dramatic change in the classroom environment caused by disruptive children. These children seem to cause a higher degree of disturbance than their numbers warrant. When this is coupled with falling rolls and the numbers of 'special needs' problems within the classroom teachers articulated increasing difficulties in resourcing subjects. Further, teachers said that stress was becoming quite severe, such that they felt they were becoming increasingly isolated.

Falling rolls meant that the school numbers fell below optimum viability as regards resourcing. This was articulated by the Report of Bedfordshire Schools (1986) and was reinforced by the minutes of subject meetings. In particular, senior subject staff could not be replaced when they left because high salary grades could not be supported. This had the effect of diminishing subject expertise and influencing the learning environment negatively. It also increased the stress under which teachers said they were working, by diminishing staff flexibility with regard to deployment and cover for illness and professional courses.

The erratic nature of the decrease in school numbers also produced the anomaly of a larger proportion of boys than girls in most classes. Whilst there was no significant difference in the degree of underachievement when related to gender, the B.S.A.G. measure of behaviour indicated that boys were significantly more likely to be disruptive in the classroom than were

girls. The higher proportion of boys therefore, had implications for classroom climate and the learning environment. By investigating the relationship of the recorded stresses in the child's life and their overt classroom behaviour to underachievement, it was possible to evaluate the predictive relationship of these variables.

Underachievement and Recorded 'Stresses'

The database enabled information to be recorded concerning the child's medical, social and educational history. These factors were further sub-divided to achieve seventeen sub-files, which are here articulated as 'stresses' in the child's life. For the whole population, the correlation between these 'stresses' and underachievement (product moment) was positive and significant but not very strong. By looking at the distribution in more detail a number of interesting facts emerged. Those children achieving to their potential or slightly above, showed no significant relationship between 'stress' and achievement, but those underachievers in a broad sense of difference of at least 5 standard units (I.Q. minus reading) displayed a positive and strong correlation with underachievement.

There are, however, some anomalies that need to be mentioned. Though there is a relationship between number of stresses and underachievement the research does not take into account the relative severity of the stresses. Nor does the research seek to explore the varying abilities of children to withstand high levels of stress. There is some evidence in the research to suggest that many children are living with a constantly high level of stress. Some children use the positive support of their parents and the stable school environment to develop coping strategies. For others, the constant debilitating stresses in their lives is exacerbated by lack of support at home and perceived failure at school. There follows a slow and inexorable

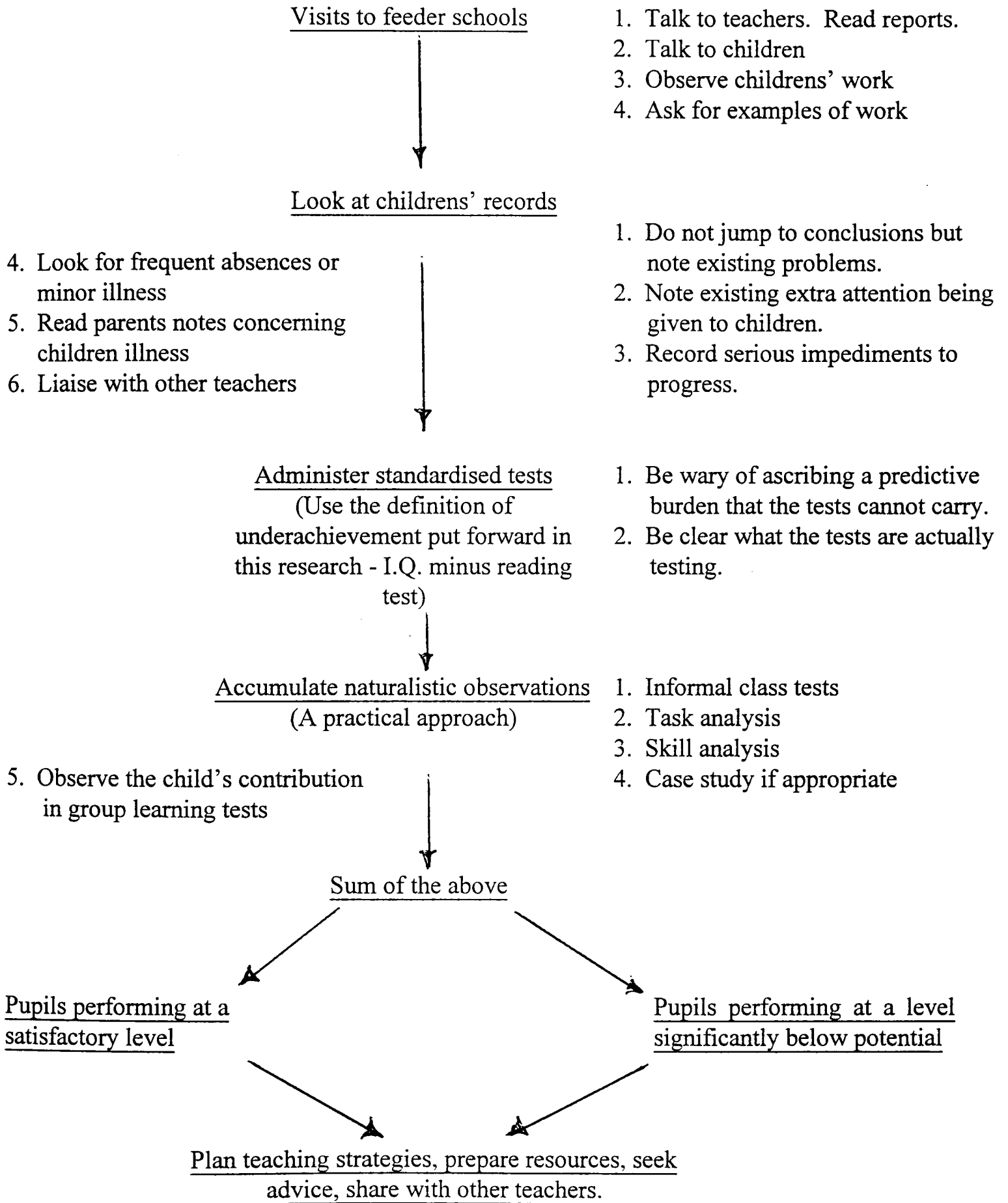
alienation from the school and the development of strategies to support the self-image of the child which seek to legitimise anti-school behaviour and underachievement. Early identification and intervention can seek to strengthen positive relationships between the child and a 'link' teacher to whom the child can relate and the production of individual learning packages can work on the child's strengths, enable the child to experience educational success and develop support strategies between the home and the school. This becomes increasingly difficult once the child has developed anti-school attitudes and can lead to a growing anti-school and anti-teacher sub-culture.

Some children under constant stress seem to be able to maintain a positive school attitude to work until a sudden and unexpected event overwhelms their ability to cope. The research noted a number of factors which had this effect; a death in the family, a particularly messy divorce and violence within the home are just a few examples. In these cases immediate counselling may be necessary and well established home-school links will minimise the feeling of isolation that the child seems to endure and the guilt that the child feels. It is ironic that the most vulnerable in traumatic circumstances is the one which is left to survive, whilst the parents have access to a whole range of professional counsellors. These guilt feelings were clearly articulated by the children in their comments about the influence of the home on achievement.

There are also some children who are underachieving and may never make a great deal of progress towards achieving their potential, but who have a lively and positive attitude towards

(Figure 10.1) Underachievement: Positive Screening and Diagnosis

(taken from minutes of staff meetings)



learning. Children with medical conditions like hydrocephalus which interferes with the brains ability to filter information effectively or with medication which changes the metabolism, are in this category. These children are predominantly characterised by qualitative professional support, well-established lines of communication between doctors, teachers and parents and good relationships between teacher and child. Other physical disorders like hearing impairment, or specific learning difficulties may also be in this category providing early diagnosis has been achieved and failure-related learning and behaviour patterns prevented.

Underachievement may also be a long term but gradually improving condition characterised by good parental support, positive attitudes from the child and qualitative teacher support within the classroom. In this case underachievement is positively supportive to the child's self-image through the level of encouragement that the child receives. These children are those who are able children but are not native English speakers.

The research also revealed that underachievers were 2½ times more likely to have short term but frequent illnesses than were the general population as revealed by an examination of attendance records. This may be related to school failure and to the attitude of parents in supporting the child's absence from school rather than actual illness. However, the research indicates a higher predisposition towards loss of school time and therefore a constant reinforcement of educational deprivation. Truancy and school refusal also figure highly amongst underachievers.

An examination of the data file shows that severe underachievers are likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, live in complex family relationships caused by remarriages and where there is a history of violence, criminal activity or death within the home.

The relationship between underachievement and recorded stress is a complex one. Most often, underachievers are characterised by high numbers of recorded stresses which interact, change and modify the child's relationship with home and school. The most important mediating factor seems to be the child's personality. Some children are able to relate to a particular teacher and to respond to their counselling and encouragement. In this way the child's anxiety is channelled towards positive endeavours rather than being suppressed. This is far too important to be left to chance. The school needs to develop a counselling system which allows the child to have some say in the choice of their personal counsellor, regular and qualitative times when relationships between child and counsellor can be developed and strengthened as well as the development of informal and formal contacts between the counsellor and the home. Regular evaluation of the child's progress should also be undertaken as a shared task between child and counsellor. Notes and records need also to be kept and cross-phase relationships developed to facilitate continuity. As the educational welfare officer and the social services are often the first contact with the home in times of stress, the school should develop clear and regular lines of communication with these and other support services. It is probable that such initiatives need a senior community teacher to organise, manage and evaluate and to give developing strategies authority and credence. This idea may also provide an early warning system to alert teachers to increasing stress levels in the child's environment and therefore to possible deteriorating achievement levels in school.

attainment and the development of over-reacting or under-reacting classroom behaviour. The opportunity to intervene in the child's environment in as many places as possible increases the chances of effective reinforcement of positive attitudes to achievement.

Underachievement and Classroom Behaviour

For the whole school population the correlation (product moment) between underachievement (I.Q. minus reading test) and classroom behaviour (B.S.A.G.) is positive and significant but not strong. However, there is a startling difference between the responses identified for boys and girls in the whole population. For boys the relationship between underachievement and classroom behaviour is positive and strongly significant such that 50% of the male population can be predicted as likely to underachieve on the basis of observed behaviour. There is no significance correlation between classroom behaviour and underachievement for girls.

This anomaly was difficult to explain initially but became clear to me when the distribution of the scores was examined. The boys' high scores were principally in those categories represented by hostile and aggressive behaviours in the classroom. This often led to confrontations with the teacher which interfered with class control. The consequence was the development of coping strategies by the teacher to contain the child. The result was deteriorating relationships between the teacher and child and increasing alienation from the mainstream educational process. If this was allowed to happen then further problems occurred. The defensive strategies adopted by the teacher tended to reinforce the child's poor behaviour patterns and there developed an anti-authoritarian pupil sub-culture within the classroom which gradually sought to devalue educational and behavioural achievement. If intervention was not attempted then there was a good chance that the rest of the class would

become 'infected' and a group or even the whole class may become in conflict with the teacher or the school.

This accords with my own experience, the comments of teachers recorded during the research and with external research looked at in the Literature Review.

The responses of the girls tended to be rather more passive. The research indicated the under-reacting behaviour was much likely to occur in girls as the result of high stress levels. This response was much more in keeping, with normal classroom practices. More time was available for the teacher to plan considered responses to the problems.

In fact girls by withdrawal from peer contact removed many of the overt causes of distress. Further, this response did not interfere with other classroom activities or threaten the authority of the teacher. The teacher was therefore much more inclined to give a great deal of time and effort to helping underachieving girls (from teacher comments in minuted meetings). The research confirms that teachers spend more time with underachieving girls than with underachieving boys. This may also relate to the earlier maturation of girls and a generally more responsive attitude to order and stability that the teachers articulated, but it may also be reinforced by the teachers unintentional attitude to gender and the stereotypes of gender.

Childrens Perspective on Underachievement

In order to plan a response to underachievement it is sensible to sample the childrens' evaluation of those factors which they consider encouraging to effective learning. It is interesting to note that children were overwhelmingly concerned about personal relationships

with their peers and with the teacher. This extended to the classroom climate and the way in which the classroom was organised. From these responses a profile of an effective teacher was produced:

(Table 10.2) The Childrens' View of a Good Teacher

Can be firm by laughs a lot
Talks clearly and doesn't shout
Explains things simply
Repeats things if you don't understand
Doesn't get impatient
Treats everyone the same
Tells you off privately
Gives you a second chance
Trusts you
Notices when you try hard
Listens to what you have to say
Shows that your opinions are valued
Isn't sarcastic
Keeps his word
Gives plenty of choices
Encourages your own interest
Marks work regularly

In spite of the violent emotional feelings that underachieving children experienced there still seemed a need for order and stability and for the valuing of individual efforts. The underlying theme seems to be that children wanted to be effective learners and to support their self-image.

In order to reduce high stress levels they transferred the blame for their failure on to the teacher. Their deteriorating behaviour is in some ways a punishment for the teachers inability to improve the situation. This is supported by looking at the ways in which the children view an encouraging classroom situation and what they consider to be a positive school environment:

(Table 10.3) Influencing Underachievement

<u>A good classroom</u>	<u>A good school</u>
Working with friends. Groupwork.	Lots of clubs.
Having a laugh. Being able to talk.	Not many rules.
Getting good marks. Regular marking.	Out of school visits
Work displayed. Display changed.	Fair punishment.
Being group leader. Own work area	Only homework if it is needed.
Plenty to do. Being listened to.	No litter or graffiti.
Lots of books. Nice equipment.	Space to play.
No favouritism.	Plenty of facilities
Treating all children alike.	
Being trusted.	

It became clear that in spite of high levels of stress at home the school was seen as a place which could supply the child with those positive elements of success which were lacking in their life. There was an expectation which was not being delivered by the school which was another contributory factor to the child's underachievement. The teachers were willing to become involved in cooperative strategies to identify, modify and evaluate the childrens' difficulties but had no model which to apply and were thrown back on their own resources. In many ways the underachieving children were partly the result of underachieving teachers and ineffective management.

Teachers Perspective on Underachievement

The emotional and personal aspects of underachievement in children was played down by the teachers. They indicated that they believed three major factors were the cause of underachievement:

1. the child's home environment;
2. lack of access to specialist expertise and resources;
3. constant changes and innovations to the curriculum.

It is not a coincidence that these factors minimise the teacher's responsibility for underachievement; the first in the difficulty of modifying home environments, the second in the powerlessness to influence the economics of falling roles and the third is the feeling of helplessness in the face of constant political initiatives.

This first reaction by teacher's to children's underachievement has a basis in truth. The effectiveness of a school can be influenced by outside factors (as noted by the Review of Bedfordshire Schools, 1986)

1. falling rolls;
 2. diminishing resources;
 3. minimal access to specialist knowledge;
 4. external demands for curriculum development;
 5. reducing opportunities for in-service training;
- teacher (rather than school) identified need

to name but a recent few. However, this has more to do with increasing teacher stress and therefore diminished patience and tolerance within the classroom than with serious external

influence on underachievement. In fact some of these initiatives are designed to encourage achievement. (L.M.S., National Curriculum and Opting Out)

The children are quite clear that the factors which most influence their behaviour and achievement within the school are to do with positive relationships developed between their peers and with the teachers. The research suggests that the children are receptive to the school atmosphere as an extension of these relationships:

- effective classroom management;
- clearly defined positive behaviour policy;
- encouraging physical environment;
- flexible timetable;
- regular formal/informal relationships with parents;

and to the development of a feeling of 'belonging'. Further, achievement is encouraged more in a positive, supportive and friendly environment where both children and teachers feel valued and their feelings and ideas used to facilitate change.

I felt initially that the childrens' responses more honestly reflected their feelings and that the teachers were seeking to deny responsibility for high levels of underachievement. On consideration, however, it became obvious that teachers were failing to 'grasp the nettle' because of their own levels of stress and feelings of isolation. In an effort to maintain their own emotional and professional integrity teachers were prioritising their efforts which sometimes meant developing isolating coping strategies to minimise the negative influence of underachievers. This was felt to safeguard the majority at the expense of the few but stored up problems for the future.

The nature of childrens' underachievement also made it difficult to recognise the problem. Children sometimes became quite skilled at avoiding detection. A highly able child that did just enough to be acceptable and displayed no behavioural problems for instance may escape the teacher's notice, especially if there were more severe difficulties that needed their immediate attention. Teachers also felt that diagnostic procedures were inadequate. All too often underachievers were only identified when they were referred for other reasons like poor behaviour or came to the attention through truancy, bullying or criminal activity. By this time intervention is very difficult to achieve.

The profile of the underachiever tended to contain factors which discouraged the teacher from giving positive aid. If the teacher's expectation was low and the child was not occupied in interesting and progressive learning experiences then the child would become inattentive, restless and bored. Sometimes children affected boredom in order to insinuate that the work presented by the teacher was inadequate in content and level. Whilst this may be true it is also intended to enable the child to suggest that his avoidance strategies were really the teachers fault in not producing adequate work. This suggestion was often taken seriously by teachers because of their tendency to be self-critical. Whilst being outwardly confident and self-sufficient underachievers are often emotionally unstable, prone to mood swings and easily upset. They are tactless and impatient with slower minds and find it difficult to make good relationships with friends or with teachers. The tendency, when they do make friends, especially outside the classroom, is for them to be older pupils or adults.

(Table 10.4) Profile of Underachievers

BACKGROUND

Poor of linguistically deprived home background.
High stress levels.
Lack of parental interest in academic achievement of child.
Unsupervised at home.
Complex family patterns.

EDUCATIONAL

Orally knowledgeable but poor written work.
Limited attention span.
Apparently bored easily.
Outwardly self-sufficient.
Does not work well in groups - through may excel in non-written work like drama.
Affects disinterest in group activities but may be a good organiser when asked to lead.
Average to above average intelligence.
Highly self-critical.

BEHAVIOUR

Extremes are common: aggression/hostility or passive/under-reaction.
Mood-swings.
Feels 'picked on' by teacher.
Anti-school/authority.
Poor response to punishment or censure.
Restless or inattentive.
Minor disruptive activities

SOCIAL

Unable to make friends easily with peers or teachers.
Friendly with older pupils or adults.
Tactless and impatient with slower minds.
Unreliable.

(Table 10.5) A Profile of Successful Intervention

Underachievement
Early identification and intervention
Positive attitude by the child to the school
Good Response to help
Qualitative monitoring
Partnership between teacher/parent
Low family stress levels
Regular evaluation

Of particular importance is the need for teachers to model the kinds of behaviour they wish to see in the children. Most children need to see clearly the justice and even-handed application of censure or punishment but respond better to praise and reward which tends to reinforce good behaviour patterns.

Development of Informal and Formal Communication

An examination of parental comments concerning the process of home/school communication revealed some interesting points. In much the same way that a child may use the communication gap between separated parents in order to seek attention by playing one off against the other, so poor liaison can be an element used by the child to prevent positive action being taken. This is particularly so in the case of home/school relationships. If this is not at a personal level then parents tend to become indifferent or even hostile, seeing the authoritative and impersonal attitude of the school as threatening. The school, often quite unintentionally, can reinforce this parental view in the way it communicates. The most

common form of communication is through letters home. However, with the majority of underachievers this means that many parents get nothing but negative messages and complaints from the school. Further, the tone of the letters tend to be formal and give the impression that the school is not personally interested in the child. If the parents, come with poor memories of their own schooling to this situation, then there is a tendency for them to become hostile to the school and be unwilling to work with teachers to improve matters. The children quite commonly exploit this communication gap by saying that teachers 'pick on them', that when they are in trouble other children 'get away' with no punishment or that it wasn't them but the teacher wouldn't listen.

Positive letters and praise for childrens' achievements are rarely used and yet these are the most prized by both parents and children.

A further problem is raised when there is a gap between the child's attitude and behaviour at home and at school. Quite commonly parents were unable to believe that their child who was helpful and positive at home was a severe problem at school. It is noticeable that teachers are prone to devalue or underestimate the influence of school-based factors on underachievement.

Good written communication is very important. A clear and simply expressed statement of the schools policy together with news sheets should also be regular features of the movement of information between home and school. Provision should be made for parents who are not fluent in English as they may be dependent on their child's translation. This provides another opportunity for the child to interfere with home/school communication. Parents in the case

study initiative repeatedly said that the gap between home and school and the impersonal nature of most communication were factors which needed improvement.

The school should provide a welcoming atmosphere for parents, starting with friendly induction procedures. The form tutor should be regularly available for the parents to meet and regular parental involvement in classroom and home learning schemes encouraged. Parental involvement in the classroom is a method of breaking down barriers but many teachers are apprehensive about the threat to their professional status, but if a sense of equal partnership is to be developed with regard to underachieving children then the gap between teacher and parent has to be diminished. Whilst teacher comments and school intent seemed to agree with this, the gap between intent and actuality was wide.

Early identification of underachievers can be achieved by clear communication systems with 'feeder' schools. Visits by teachers to lower schools has the advantages of:

1. improving the relationship of schools across the phase gap;
2. obtaining verbal assessments from class teachers;
3. encouraging continuity in behavioural systems and curriculum progress;
4. beginning the development of teacher/pupil relationships;
5. minimising the trauma often felt by children when moving schools;

and visits by children to their new school can also diminish the threat posed by imminent change.

Communication with school support institutions is of great value. Education welfare officers and social workers may provide the school with the first indication of stressful circumstances within the home which may effect the child's achievement. Unfortunately, this communication is rarely attempted until the situation is at crisis level and intervention is very difficult. Opportunities for support professional to meet regularly and discuss both general and particular problems with a senior member staff erodes the mystique which develops as the result of poor liaison. It is also an interesting suggestion made by teachers that all parties in the child's development should be involved in in-service training where appropriate.

Opportunities for informal and social interaction (coffee mornings, film evenings, parent disco evenings, staff/parent football matches) can also be instrumental in cementing personal relationships between teachers and parents. This makes the teachers more approachable and encourages the parents to view the school as a friendly and welcoming environment. This 'open door' approach minimises misunderstandings, promotes a positive view of education, establishes the school as a vibrant centre of the community and minimise the gap between home and school. This became clear through comments by teachers and parents. A well organised and effective Parent/Teacher Association is also seen as encouraging positive communication between the home and the school.

The diagnostic work of the teacher in the early identification of learning problems is very important. In this way perceived 'failure' to progress can be prevented from becoming entrenched and frustration, anger and other behavioural symptoms minimised. It can also give positive support to the child and enable individualised programmes of study to be developed.

It was also felt that a member of staff should be identified to provide counselling support and more use made of the school medical staff, the county educational psychologist and the welfare officer in order to get a full picture of the child's psychological, social and medical health.

Research Evaluation

The most successful part of the research was the way in which teachers (even under stress) were willing and to work cooperatively for their mutual benefit. In some ways this created difficulties in that what was desirable with regard to change took precedence and didn't necessarily coincide with my research aims.

I was also conscious that the imminent school closure prevented the development of a more cogent research design and interfered with a number of changes that I had in mind. In sampling the views of children to underachievement, the way in which I collected the data did not allow me to identify the specific views of underachievers or to be able to compare the view of underachievers with those of achievers. The initial reason for choosing the method I did was to involve both children and teachers in a practical task to maximise the cooperation of underachieving children by guaranteeing anonymity. The survey questions asked, to elicit the views of teachers are not capable of direct comparison with the children's views as the questions were phrased differently and were therefore possibly sampling different things. This was caused by the demands of the action research programme - the teachers became involved in setting targets, identifying needs and modifying the research programme.

I would have also liked to compare the levels of achievement at 9+ with those at 12+ but having left the school I was unable to complete the database. In particular I was interested in evaluating the effectiveness of school strategies in targeting underachievement; the influence of maturation on behaviour and achievement and gender relationships.

The concept of in-service education also being collaborative action research is a useful paradigm for other schools to use. The teachers taking part in the research were impressed by the way in which targets related directly to the needs of the school, and were capable of modification or response to emerging issues. Economically, the cost was minimal as the research sought to use the expertise of the staff. External courses, visiting experts and 'patch' initiatives could be fed into the research as the need arose.

The classroom support of teachers through team-teaching initiatives was identified as particularly helpful in generating and sharing resources and supporting discipline. It also enabled good practice and skills in teaching to be shared through the 'mentoring' practice of pairing young teachers with more experienced colleagues.

The research also used existing school management and administrative systems in order to minimise unnecessary change and to identify and strengthen good practice. In this way change was perceived as responding to need and rooted in the corporate requirements of the teachers. The ideas of individual staff were valued and a collaborative 'ownership' of the research encouraged and a cycle of identification intervention, development of resources, assessment and identification, developed.

Schools Can Make a Difference

Underachievement seems to be related to the school atmosphere, as well as the other factors discussed earlier. An effective and positive learning environment seems to promote good levels of educational achievement and behaviour. This does not mean that the school can eliminate the influence of social differences. The research suggests that linguistically disadvantaged children still perform, on average, less well than children from an advantaged home. (Appendix 1) However, a disadvantaged child in a positive learning environment is likely to do better than an advantaged child in an ineffective learning situation. It can be said in broad terms that an underachieving teacher is the principal cause of underachieving children and that an underachieving teacher is the result of an underachieving school.

What is clear is that the school routine - timetables, standards of work, behaviour and attendance - work together to produce an effect on children's behaviour and attainment. The teacher's attitude and response to the standards of behaviour, for instance, seems to influence the way in which the children behave. An ineffective teacher's classroom, for instance was characterised by:

- widespread litter in the classroom;
- teacher starts the lesson late and finishes early;
- graffiti on the desks;
- ignoring bad behaviour in the playground and corridor;
- work not displayed and marked infrequently;
- pupils late and getting away with it;
- a lack of politeness;

erratic and inappropriate punishments;

lessons not prepared;

frequent confrontations;

very little humour.

These variables were articulated by teachers in their year group meetings.

This seems to contribute towards a lack of cohesiveness and a sense of community within the classroom. Teachers are under great stress and feel isolated and the children feel undervalued; they are expected to achieve poorly and behave badly and so they do. Effective action starts with the recognition that underachievement cannot simply be attributed to factors outside the school but that it may be the result of the school's failure to identify difficulties and provide a positive learning environment.

The way in which schools are managed and classrooms organised can be changed. This can be an uncomfortable process if teachers feel threatened. What is the first priority is the recognition of the need for change and the second a positive commitment to see it through.

If imposed from the top by a linear system of command, change was seen to be autocratic and often ineffective in carrying the staff along. What was crucial was that teachers were clearly focused on the problem and developed a corporate ownership in change. It was seen to be related to the needs of the teachers and children and that teachers' ideas could modify the process and that the process could respond to emerging issues. In this way the development of teamwork, the encouragement of a collective responsibility for the curriculum and

improved communication and consultation, focused on valuing and supporting teachers in the process of change.

The effective management system in this situation is a combination of line management and the consultative role coupled with the 'first among equals' philosophy. Teachers repeatedly indicated during the research that:

1. they needed to feel that their school had a sense of direction;
2. they needed to feel that this direction could be influenced by their views;
3. they needed to feel valued as individuals in this process.

Conclusion

The study reflects the difficulty of breaking down the concept of underachievement into its constituent parts. This process is essentially false in that such parts only exist in isolation for the narrative convenience of the research.

Some factors seem to have a more serious influence on underachievement than others. However, the levels of influence are related to type and number of external stresses which is in turn associated by predispositions to certain types of behaviour. Both of these factors can be used as general predictors of underachievement and in conjunction with standardised tests underachievers can be identified. However, the level of reaction to high levels of stress is mediated by the child's personality - the ability to cope with stress - and the learning environment in which the child is placed. A positive and encouraging classroom with personal interest from the teacher and support from the homes seems to minimise the

response. Early identification and intervention at a number of points in the child's environment (school and home) seem to result in the most beneficial results.

At a more specific level there are serious difficulties in postulating a general definition of underachievement because there are a number of different types. The general observations of researchers are usually concerned with 'negative' underachievers - characterised by high levels of stress, abnormal classroom behaviour, linguistic deprivation and failure. These are the children who tend to cause the most concern as they are the majority of underachievers and create the most disruption within the classroom. Even among this category whilst some factors seem to exert an inordinate influence on the child's achievement, it is the subtle interaction between all factors which seems to lead to underachievement. In other words the child's response is both individual and specific and educational and behavioural packages must relate to the personal needs of the individual child. This causes generalisation to have limited value.

A further problem amongst the whole range of underachievement is the difference in response to stress, failure and adult intervention in relationship to gender. The manifestation of boys general hostility and girls passivity as a behavioural aspect of underachievement, demands quite different responses and levels of expertise; particularly as hostility needs an immediate response and passivity allows a more considered approach.

Further a significant minority of underachievers do not seem to be suffering high levels of stress or to be displaying abnormal behaviour. They have positive attitudes to learning, have

been identified early and are receiving qualitative information and professional support.

Among these may be:

1. long term medical problems influencing mood changes through medication;
2. premature birth resulting in specific learning difficulties;
3. medical problems like hydrocephalus which can cause memory impairment;
4. 'religious exclusive', as a result of restricted curriculum and diminished levels of socialisation;
5. children for whom English is their second language.

For some of these there will probably always be a degree of underachievement whilst for others they may reach or even surpass the achievement of their peers.

The concept of negative and positive forms of underachievement is complicated still further by the observation that these forms may be separate forms of underachievement or part of a continuum depending on the success of intervention strategies (Figure 10.6)

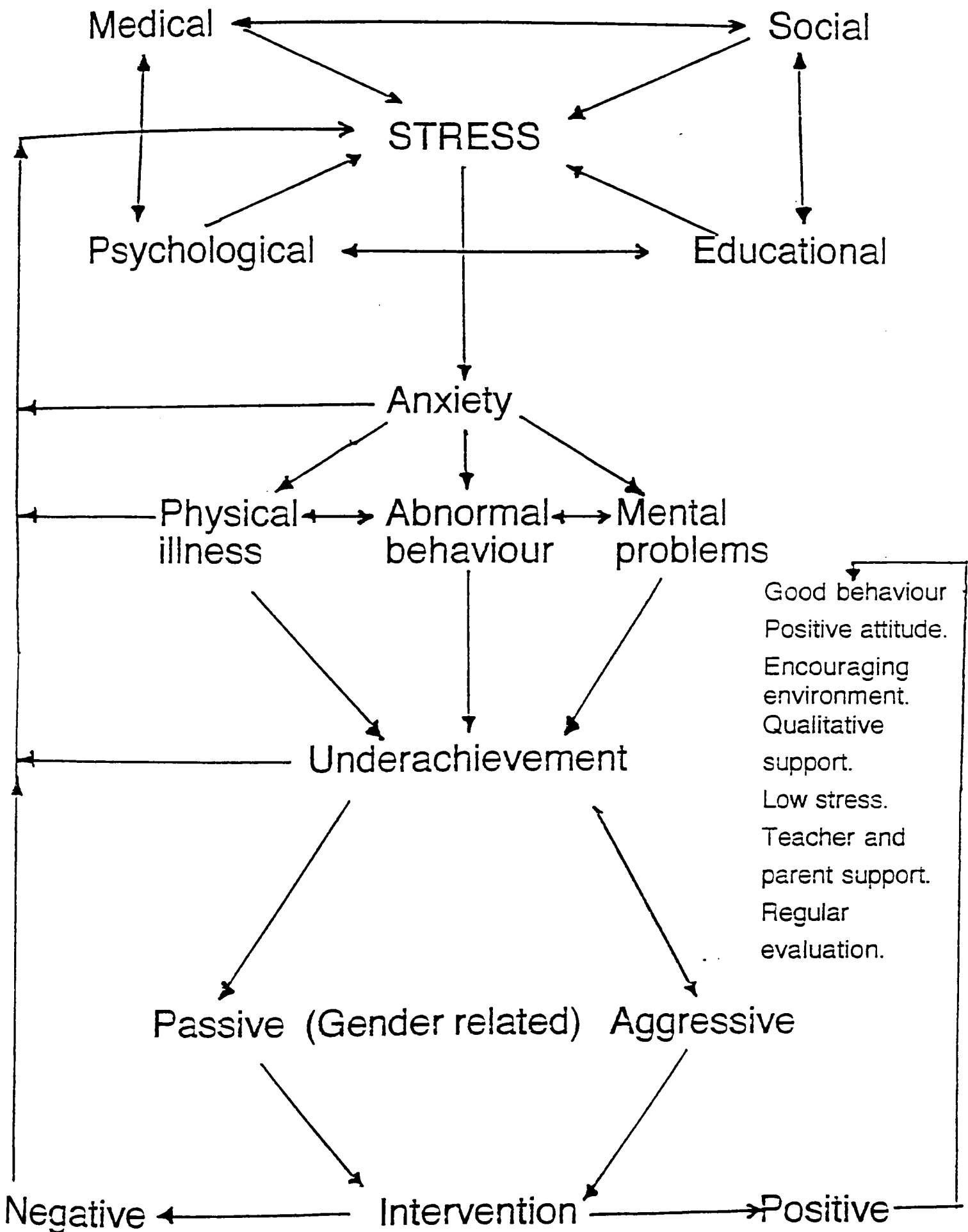
Initial teacher response to underachievement within the school related the phenomenon to the type of social and class factors identified by Bernstein and others and suggested that teachers had little power to modify these factors. The research revealed that within the school many other factors seemed to be influencing the levels of achievement attained by children. This forced the teachers to confront the possibility that teaching skills, school organisation, resources and personal relationships all influenced the way in which children performed.

Further, by modifying the classroom environment (as was noted by using drama to elicit childrens' opinions) different sets of children became high achievers and suggested that a variety of learning situations presents the underachieving child with the opportunity for success and approbation which encourages positive attitudes and supports the child's self-image.

The way in which the child's opinions were obtained convinces me of the honesty of the responses. If this is the case then they are of great significance. The children articulate the view that the school is more positive than the home in supporting their learning but of great importance is the way in which they develop personal relationships with their teachers and their peers. This does not deny the general understanding of underachievement which is related to stresses under which the children are labouring but it suggests that the school need not add to these stresses and can be a compensatory factor in the childrens' lives. Therefore in spite of seeming disaffection and isolation the children still see the school as a therapeutic institution which seemed to hold the opportunity for them to rise above the stresses of their lives.

This surprised many teachers as these were the children viewed as classroom 'failures' - who, as a result of their abnormal behaviour and poor relationships with other children and the teacher, had often to be isolated. The children, in spite of 'failure', still regarded their position in the class, their relationships with teachers and other children and their own self-image to be very important to them.

(Figure 10.6) A Concept of Underachievement



This has teaching implications for:

1. the way in which the classroom is organised;
2. the variety of classroom activities available for different 'star' groups to shine;
3. how children are treated as individuals;
4. what individualised learning packages are produced;
5. how often the children have a say in their own learning activities.

This research has encouraged me to develop an interest in obtaining childrens' views about the importance of socialisation within the classroom and the ways in which the child's self-image influences achievement. This would further look at the importance of peer and teacher relationships and seek to develop teaching and organisational initiatives building on the needs of the children. What is needed is a conceptual framework for sampling how children see their classrooms and their opportunities for positive achievement.

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APPENDIX 1

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