

'No excuses': inside Britain's strictest school

The Guardian, Richard Adams (Education editor). Fri 30 Dec 2016.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/dec/30/no-excuses-inside-britains-strictest-school#:~:text=At%20the%20Michaela%20community%20school,teacher%E2%80%9D%20by%20the%20Sunday%20Times.>

Katharine Birbalsingh's Michaela school in north London has a formidable reputation thanks to its emphasis on discipline – but opinion is split on its approach to teaching. It is billed as the strictest school in Britain – but the headteacher says its biggest challenge is not keeping pupils in line, but with critics from outside.

At the Michaela community school in Brent, north London, the emphasis on discipline has earned it a formidable reputation, with the headteacher, Katharine Birbalsingh, touted as “Britain's strictest teacher” by the Sunday Times. But some educationalists are less enamoured: almost every evening on social media sees skirmishes between pro- and anti-Michaela factions.

Sometimes, according to Birbalsingh – one of the small number of black or ethnic minority women heading a secondary school in England – the debate turns sour. The emails are the worst, she says. “They wish us cancer and things like that, because they don't like what we are doing,” she says. “People ask me, what's your biggest challenge running the school? It's the detractors on the outside. On the inside there are daily challenges. But the detractors on the outside are very time-consuming, emotionally draining. And they are obsessive.”

At the school, a group of pupils prepare to end their break and move to their next lesson. They line up quietly under the eye of their teacher – who stops to ask one of them to pick up a grape from the floor. “Do you see that?” Birbalsingh tells a group of visiting teachers. “In other schools that would never happen. You'd never see a teacher ask a pupil to pick up a grape, because they'd go mad.” She says one of the things that is different about Michaela, the state secondary school she founded three years ago, is its unwillingness to let even a single pupil – or grape – go astray. “It's about habit change, and constantly reminding pupils to be respectful,” Birbalsingh says. “We have made it unacceptable not to pick that grape up.”

The year 7 pupils file out to their next class, illustrating another Michaela principle: silent corridors. The children walk between classrooms without speaking, in single file, moving quickly. Anyone who does not gets a demerit, leading to a detention. The reason, says Birbalsingh, is that corridors in schools are where bad behaviour often takes place: pushing and fights breaking out as large groups of children mill around. By moving in a straight line, the children stay calm and focused for their next lesson.

Michaela's staff are mostly young and active on Twitter and the education blogosphere, and Birbalsingh and the school have just published a book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers*. It carries an endorsement from the philosopher Roger Scruton, who says Michaela is a model “that all our schools should imitate”.

One of the staff, Joe Kirby, has detailed Michaela's “no excuses” policy: detentions are awarded for arriving one minute late to school, for not completing homework, for scruffy work, for not having a pen or ruler, for reacting badly to a teacher's instruction by tutting or rolling eyes, and even for “persistently turning round in class” after being told not to. Detention for not having a pen sounds harsh – until you learn that Michaela provides pens to all pupils at the start of the year, that there is a school shop selling cut-price ones each morning, and that parents are given persistent reminders about the equipment their children need to bring every day.

Michaela hit the headlines in 2016 when it emerged children whose parents had not paid for school lunches were made to eat in a separate room. But Birbalsingh was unmoved by the criticism. She says: “At other schools if their parents didn't pay they wouldn't get any lunch at all. Here they still get lunch, a good lunch.”

Birbalsingh herself has been in the news since she spoke scathingly about the state of England's schools at the 2010 Conservative party conference. After her appearance, she left her job as vice-principal of an academy in south London. The launch of free schools gave her an opportunity to open Michaela in 2014, in an old college building close to Wembley stadium.

In her office, Birbalsingh briefs the visitors – teachers and officials from Abu Dhabi's education council – on the school, starting with its discipline. “The children love it here because they know that in comparison to their primary schools or schools where they were before, that they learn so much here, it's quiet, they are not being bullied,” she tells them. “They can go to the toilet here and not be worried about being bullied. At other schools you will find

children who train themselves not to go to the toilet all day because they are so scared of the bullying that takes place. So they just don't go to the loo. That isn't the case here."

The second big difference, Birbalsingh says, is the school's traditional style of teaching. "We have the teacher standing at the front and imparting knowledge. We believe the teacher knows more than the children. Most teachers in Britain do not believe that. They believe that the children and teachers all know pretty much the same stuff, which is why the children just need to be guided by the teacher as opposed to being taught by the teacher."

But the third reason is more arresting. "We teach kindness and gratitude, because we think children should be kind to each other and to their teachers and be grateful for everything we do for them."

Being a teacher and a parent, Birbalsingh explains, is "the most exhilarating, most exciting, most important job in the country". Instead, she says, teachers in Britain were "driven into the ground". She adds: "Teachers and parents need support and appreciation. That doesn't happen in this country. Teachers are constantly being vilified in the press, they are constantly being attacked. There are actual examples of teachers getting attacked in the street, and nothing really happens to the assailants. "If I'd have had those children in this school, they wouldn't be attacking anybody. They would be different human beings when they grow up, and that is because they would have learned kindness and gratitude here."

"You will find in other schools, children are not kind at all, they are horrible. And they are horrible because nobody has taught them how to be kind," Birbalsingh says. There is an element of hyperbole in Birbalsingh's depiction of other schools. Sir Michael Wilshaw, the outgoing Ofsted chief inspector, made his name with a strict regime as head of Mossbourne academy in Hackney. And the Ark academy chain's King Solomon academy in Paddington uses similar techniques.

The stakes for Michaela are high: it is awaiting its first Ofsted inspection, and in two years' time will produce its first GCSE results.

What is particularly striking is the school's attention to detail. The corridor carpet has a black line woven into it for the pupils to follow. The classrooms have hooks on the back wall to stow jackets and bags, to stop them getting in the way. Pupils must use a school-issue pencil case made of clear plastic. The pupil's bathrooms don't have mirrors, and makeup is banned. The staff bathroom has a framed letter of praise from a government minister in one of the cubicles. Every detail, and the silent corridor routine, has a single purpose: to maximise the pupils' time in front of a teacher so that learning takes centre stage.

Even lunch, a spirited affair starting with pupils loudly reciting the poem *If*, includes exhortations from the deputy head about pupils completing the homework over Christmas. "Don't make the wrong choices," he warns the pupils, underlining a Michaela theme.

Birbalsingh, meanwhile, is applying to open another free school, this time an "all-through" school from reception to sixth form.

But would Michaela need to be strict if it was in a wealthy suburb such as Hampstead rather than deprived Brent, where 30% of pupils are on free school meals?

"I don't think it would need to be. But I think all schools should be like this," Birbalsingh says.

Questions:

1. You must send a child to school in either a Freire school, or a Michaela school? What decision would you make if you were (a) you, the student, (b) your parents, and (c) for your own children. Justify your answer in each case.
2. What positives can you identify from the approach adopted by Birbalsingh in the Michaela Schools?
3. What negatives can you identify from the approach adopted by Birbalsingh in the Michaela Schools?
4. To what degree do the conditions in the Michaela School reflect the socio-economic context of the school's students?

How would Paulo Freire critique the Michaela School? Identify 3 elements of the practices there that he would be particularly interested in?