



# IS THIS THE STRICTEST TEACHER IN BRITAIN?

No fighting, no lying. Break the rules and it's the isolation room. The free-school head Katharine Birbalsingh is convinced that children thrive on tough love, but does it work? *Sian Griffiths* went to Brent to find out

**A**t 12.30pm sharp, a throng of 11-year-olds crowds into the lunch hall and starts to chant Kipling's *If*: "If you can dream — and not make dreams your master...". Poem completed, they move silently to their tables, each named after a university — Imperial, Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge. Pupils serve food, collect plates, wipe the tables and hand out water. Over lunch they will debate a set topic; for example, is Winston Churchill the most inspirational person you have read about in history? The food is always vegetarian and there is a brief time allocated for eating it.

My meat-free sausages are cleared away unfinished by a small, smiling girl and I just manage to cram my chocolate brownie into my mouth before the pudding plates are also swept away. It will teach me to talk so much. Teachers patrol the tables. The deputy head Barry Smith points at a boy. He rises to his feet and gives thanks (the school calls it an "appreciation"). "I'd

like to give an appreciation to my teacher for giving me a detention for failing to annotate my work," he says smoothly. Everyone applauds, two staccato claps. The boy sits down and another stands up.

The Michaela Community School, in Brent, northwest London, is housed alongside a busy railway line in a run-down part of the capital. It opened a little more than two years ago, in September 2014, but already it is making waves. Some call it the strictest school in Britain: pupils at this free school can be given demerits for anything from slouching in their seat to having the wrong kind of haircut, leaving spaces that are too wide between the words in homework or turning around in a lesson.

Earlier this year a media storm ensued after a boy was made to eat a cold lunch on his own because his parents had not paid the termly dinner money. Jewellery and make-up are banned, as are brand names and logos on any bags, coats and even shoes. Two demerits result in a detention. For some infringements of the school rules — such as lying or fighting — pupils go straight to the isolation room to work in silence for an entire day. Mobile phones are confiscated and shoes have to be polished.

Lessons are highly academic; older (13- and 14-year-old) pupils are expected to do about 90 minutes of homework a night and there are no comics or magazines in the

library, which instead stocks classics of English literature such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Great Expectations*. There are daily quizzes and exams twice a year. Pupils walk in single file and in silence in the corridors and regularly write thank-you notes to teachers. Expectations are high: Katharine Birbalsingh, the headmistress, says that every child is treated as though they have the potential to get to Oxbridge, even though some enter the school with low attainment and poor behaviour records.

Michaela is named after a former colleague of Birbalsingh — "an extraordinary teacher" — who died in 2011. The school at present is made up of 11- to 14-year-olds. Each autumn a new batch of children arrives and, by 2020, it will be full, with 840 on the roll. Although the students will not take GCSE exams for another two years, the school is already collecting data about whether its methods are working — and students are, on average, making double the normal progress in both English and maths each year, it claims. "We have pupils who make up five years' reading progress in one year," Birbalsingh wrote recently.

Joe Kirby, one of four deputy head teachers, is glad he works at Michaela. In other schools, he says, he saw children who were ignorant of even basic knowledge in many subjects. Friends who trained with him, now in their thirties, echo his concerns. "One teacher told me her pupils thought Manchester was in Scotland, >>>

Wales was an island and the Romans came from Portugal,” he says. By contrast, one Michaela boy could spot the mistake when Boris Johnson suggested on a visit that Emperor Constantine signed the Edict of Milan, which ended the persecution of Christians, in AD312. “I believe it was AD313, sir,” the pupil said politely — and Boris admitted he was right.

So, is this the strictest school in Britain — and, more important, is it working? I put this to Birbalsingh as we sit down after lunch in her big airy office. She smiles. “I think it is likely to be the strictest school, yes,” she says. “I think all schools should be super-strict. It is about believing that children do best in an ordered and structured environment.”

Unsurprisingly, Birbalsingh has her critics. She was denounced as “the Tory teacher” after she appeared at the 2010 Conservative party conference to deliver a barnstorming speech condemning the “culture of excuses and low standards” in inner-city schools. Now she is on a mission to subvert the progressive, liberal philosophies that she believes have corroded English schools since the 1960s and 1970s, when many grammar schools were replaced by comprehensives. Tough love is what children thrive on, says Birbalsingh, not excuses. Michaela’s motto is “work hard, be kind”.

Among the working-class communities that surround the school, the philosophy is proving popular and Michaela, which selects pupils by means of a lottery, is oversubscribed. Pupils come from a wide range of backgrounds: 40% are Afro-Caribbean. More than half live in families so poor that they qualify for the pupil premium grant, while one in five has special educational needs, and nearly half speak English as a second language. One-third start at Michaela with a reading age below their chronological age. Some have been thrown out of their previous schools.

“When you see the children are kind and happy and love learning and being here, you begin to be persuaded there is something to what we do,” Birbalsingh tells me. “They are more polite, better behaved, do their homework and they are ambitious. They are kind to their friends and look after each other. We are more than just a school. We are also about helping to question the prevailing orthodoxies of our British education system.”

Later this month, a group of teachers at the school will publish a book setting out their philosophy. Its title, *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers*, is a deliberate echo of the now infamous memoir by the Chinese American mum and law professor Amy Chua, which explains how she brought up her own daughters according to parenting practices common in southeast Asia, where she grew up. Chua’s book extols the virtues of “tiger” mothers, the kind who make children work ferociously hard, spend hours



**HE STANDS CORRECTED** Boris Johnson thought he knew his Roman history until a pupil at Michaela pointed out he had made a mistake with a date

practising musical instruments and always, always do their best — because it has been drilled into them that success is down to their own efforts.

“The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers is all about us and what we do differently,” says Birbalsingh. “It will explain why kids here are grateful for being reprimanded because they know it makes them a better person in the end. It will be a controversial book — people in the education system will reject our tough-love ideology without considering it. But you can see that there is no bullying here; children are safe and secure and happy and they can achieve.”

The book includes interviews with visitors, parents and pupils, who all seem to agree. They insist that the consistently applied behaviour policies, focus on reading and hard work and high expectations are a recipe for turning children’s lives around. Boris Johnson, Nick Gibb, Toby Young and Roger Scruton are among the politicians, journalists and academics who have written testimonials for the book. It also contains contributions from the pupils themselves.

“Since the day I was told I was accepted into Michaela Community School I have changed,” writes Jerome, 12. “Before I came to Michaela I watched TV six hours a day. Now I only watch two hours a week, so I have more time to help my siblings with their homework and tidying their room. I always used to have flaming arguments with my mum. Since I’ve started at Michaela we don’t argue, we actually bond more, we laugh together. My sisters and I were always fighting, but now we don’t as much, my anger has calmed down a lot.”

**She was denounced as ‘the Tory teacher’ after a barnstorming speech on the ‘culture of excuses and low standards’**

Michael, 12, compares his primary school with Michaela. “In my old school behaviour was really bad,” he writes. “Students would have water fights in lessons and throw water at teachers. Students would write swear words on the whiteboard. If students were angry they would throw their chairs... Corridors were a mess... and pupils would hide in the toilets to skip lessons. I am happy and grateful I came to Michaela because everything here is different. The teachers care about all of our futures.”

Anyone who has watched television documentaries made in comprehensive schools such as *Educating Essex* or *Educating Yorkshire* and seen pupils mucking about in class, pulling out mobile phones and generally being disrespectful to teachers, will know that Michaela’s teaching methods are unusual by today’s standards. In too many English schools misbehaviour is common. A report by the school inspectorate Ofsted in 2014 found that one hour of learning was being lost on average each day in schools in England because of bad behaviour — 38 days per pupil per year. Michaela harks back to an earlier age when teachers were respected and feared in equal measure. An astonishing one in three teachers at the school are not qualified; although some of them have Oxbridge degrees, they have not completed the certificate of teaching practice, which is still the standard way of becoming a certified teacher. Birbalsingh believes this to be an advantage, because it means the teachers have not been corrupted by being trained in what she regards as permissive teaching methods.

Not everyone agrees. Teaching unions and the Labour party fiercely oppose the use of unqualified teachers in schools, arguing that they are a threat to school standards.

For *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers*, 20 members of the school’s staff have each written a chapter on different aspects of the Michaela way. One particularly eye-catching one by Joe Kirby explains how 11-year-olds are taught ➤➤➤

the Michaela ethos and rules in a seven-day "boot camp" before school begins each September. "We teach them that silence in lessons is golden, that it helps us listen and helps us learn... We love mnemonics! We teach them explicitly how to be polite using Steps, saying 'sir' or 'miss', 'thank you', 'excuse me', 'please' and smiling," he writes. They are drilled in the school rules. "We explain in minute detail what we give demerits for and what we give detentions for... We teach pupils how best to respond to a demerit: not by arguing, sulking, protesting or grumbling in the moment, but by staying calm, practising patience, keeping their self-control."

He goes on to explain why the bar is set so high. "Many arrive not knowing how to read, how to multiply and divide single-digit numbers, how to tell the time or how to use a knife and fork," he writes. "Many struggle to make eye contact or have a conversation with an adult."

"When I asked in one of the first assemblies how many have short tempers, 80% of the year of 120 put their hands up. When I asked how many had been told they had 'anger management issues' at primary school, over 50% put their hands up." Some had a track record of bullying, threats and aggression towards other pupils. A few had threatened their mothers with violence.

"Blame and excuses are default reactions to reprimands: 'It's not my fault!' 'He made me do it!' Making the minimum, lazy, slouchy effort in lessons and in homework is an automatic reflex for most on arrival."

Can a stint at Michaela really solve all these issues? And how on earth do they get new pupils to accept the structure and discipline? The school accepts that there are sometimes tears and tantrums as students embark on the Michaela way, but after a few detentions children begin to accept that they are responsible for their actions.

Not everyone, however, is convinced that the school's culture will help all its pupils. The education expert Sally Power, a professor at Cardiff University, argues that while some children would benefit from the high level of discipline at Michaela, others might end up rejecting it. "It is a high-risk strategy," she says. "Some teenagers, as they get older, might well rebel if the school is too rigid in terms of what it deems acceptable or unacceptable behaviour."

Karen, 14, and Cathy, 13, the two Michaela pupils who have been charged with giving me a tour of their school, seem to understand perfectly that they are responsible for their actions, accepting punishments for misdemeanours without protest. "Some pupils have been excluded," one tells me. "You get a spell in isolation if you go on WhatsApp and send messages. Lying about someone doing something means isolation too. Isolation runs from 7.30am to 5.30pm. You study on your own

## TIGER TEACHERS SAY...

The head teacher Katharine Birbalsingh explains why the Michaela rules are as tough on parents as they are on pupils

**L**ast September, Korey joined our school. He is black, has special needs and lives on an estate. His mother and grandmother were desperate. His father was absent. His primary school said that he was the worst-behaved child they had ever seen. We happily invited Korey into Michaela. While detractors of our no-excuses approach to discipline insist that it excludes children, in fact the opposite is true.

I told Korey's mother, as I tell all parents, that we need two things from her: 1) 100% support. 2) 100% competence.

I also say: "You would not tell a doctor how to cut you open, move your organs around and then sew you back up." Parents normally laugh, which is my cue to say: "Ah, you laugh now, but the day will come when you won't like something and you will tell me how 99 of the rules are fine, but that you want me to change this one rule. And I will tell you no. It is not your place to tell me how to run the school."

I explained to Korey's mother how the school works, why we have silent classrooms with hard-working children, learning more than anyone could have imagined possible, even more than their counterparts at private schools. I point to our silent and orderly corridors, and lunch halls that are free from bullying, our playground where children are able to be children. It works because we do not pander to every parental whim, making exceptions in order to "accommodate".

I give parents the option to turn us down. I understand we are not the right choice for every family. Usually, the more middle-class the family, the more likely they are to reject what is on offer at Michaela. But Korey's mother was not middle-class. She was a black single mum with two jobs, about to have a breakdown because her boy was so out of control. She cried. "I'm not

going to lie to you," I said. "This is going to be hard. The question is whether you have the stomach for it."

The second part of the bargain can be harder. Not all parents are able to give 100% competence. And with this, we are a little more forgiving. All of them try to get there. Parents are generally happy when you tell them that X-Y-Z will happen to their child if he doesn't toe the line. But we make it clear that mum (or dad) will be hauled into the school if the homework isn't done, and that parents will be held responsible. If necessary, I tell parents that they are not being a very good mother or father and that things have to change. "Think of us as a personal trainer," I say. "You will get better at parenting if you stick with us."

Some parents can get angry when they are told they are not doing their job well. My response is always the same: as a head it is my duty to highlight their failings. To do otherwise would be to let their child down.

In Britain, it has become so normal to lie to parents that schools don't even think they are doing it. It is considered compassionate. Parents receive cut-and-pasted report cards where negatives are always framed as positives. Parents remain in blissful ignorance until their child does poorly at their GCSEs. But by then, it is too late. The blame is all laid on the child.

Korey is now one of our extraordinary successes. We have so many of these, I have lost count. He is achieving and is totally unrecognisable from who he was at primary school. He understands that to be successful, he needs to develop all of himself, not just pass exams: behaviour matters. Now he can do anything he wants with his life. We made Korey's mum a promise. I know we will deliver.

*Extracted from The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers, edited by Katharine Birbalsingh, published on November 29 (John Catt £14)*

and teachers check on you every hour. I have been in isolation once. The discipline is strict, but it helps us to improve."

The other girl chips in: "I had a detention after my pencil case fell from a window sill into the playground."

I assume she means she dropped the pencil case into the playground on purpose, but no, it was an accident, she says. "What?" I splutter, "And she got a detention for that?" Didn't she think it was a bit harsh?

"I did at first, but then I realised that it was my responsibility to make sure I didn't put my pencil case somewhere like

that. I won't do that again," she answers.

Both have ambitions to go to a good university and, far from seeming cowed by the strict regime, appear to be thriving on it.

Some parents, however, find accepting responsibility more difficult. Birbalsingh's own chapter in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers* is about the role she expects parents to play in supporting the school's approach. They are asked to sign a contract when their child is admitted, promising to uphold the school's policies, help their children complete their homework and ensure they attend detentions. ➤➤➤

Not all follow through. She admits that a few have already withdrawn their children, after taking issue with rules such as the school's policy of confiscating mobile phones or banning "two haircuts on one head" (a buzz cut around the edges and a longer style on top, for example). "Parents complain, I don't budge," she says firmly.

This summer the school featured in the national press after a mother received a letter stating that her child would be put into "lunch isolation" and be given only a sandwich and piece of fruit unless payment was made within a week for the term's school dinners. A sum of £75 was outstanding. When the media ran a story critical of the school, staff were bombarded with hate mail and trolled on social media. In the face of the family's protests, Birbalsingh stood her ground. The boy's parents withdrew him from the school.

Today she is unrepentant about her refusal to back down in what the Twitterati dubbed #lunchgate. With many of the pupils already receiving free school dinners because they come from poor homes, she argues that the school cannot afford to continue its nutritious and healthy meal service if families that can afford to pay refuse to do so or are late with the monies.

"One parent pulled their child out because they did not like the food, another because we have Michaela trousers and they wanted to buy her trousers elsewhere," says Birbalsingh. "Another parent pulled her child out because she wanted her boy's mobile phone back.

"Some parents can get very angry when they are told they are not doing their job as a parent very well," she continues. "A mother who is more interested in recovering her child's mobile phone than she is in supporting him with his homework is simply not doing her job as his mother. And it is our duty to tell her this."

In the book she writes: "I wish the small minority of unsupportive parents could be in our assemblies and our boot camp lessons. They would learn about personal responsibility, duty and mindset. They would understand that they, like their child, are master of not only their fate but of their child's fate too."

The fact that Michaela exists at all is a miracle. Birbalsingh, 43, a slim energetic mother of one with a cloud of black curls, battled for years to open the free school. After her appearance at the Tory party conference six years ago she turned her experiences of teaching into a fictionalised book called *From Miss, with Love*.

She was branded "Michael Gove's pet" by her detractors. When she returned to her school after her conference speech, she faced so much criticism that she resigned within weeks. Later, she tried to open a free school under Gove's education reform programme, but was picketed by teaching unions and left-wing activists.



**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**  
Pupils take turns at serving food or collecting plates and each lunchtime there is a set topic for discussion

In 2012 she won government approval to start up her free school in Lambeth, but it never materialised. Sources suggest that the project was forced out of the borough when it met "massive" local council and teaching union opposition. Birbalsingh next tried to open the Michaela Community School in Wandsworth, but failed to secure a site.

After the Tory conference she briefly became a media star, invited to write for national newspapers and appear on TV as an education commentator. But she was so badly affected by the protests against her that she refused press invitations for several months, fearing that the publicity made her more of a target. In *Battle Hymn* she says: "In the early days the threats and abuse were so bad that I was scared to walk down the street and at one stage, for many months, I became very ill from the stress."

Even when she finally secured her current site in Brent, the opposition did not cease. "We have had people picket our school and scare our children," she tells me. "They gave out fliers saying the children were in danger here. Really awful stuff."

With her school established, she is determined to fulfil her ambition to help poor and working-class children have a shot at the kind of opportunities that transformed her own life. Birbalsingh knows that education is the key that makes possible glittering careers and fulfilling lives, especially for children from ordinary homes.

Born in New Zealand, she spent her childhood in Toronto, Canada, where her father, a Guyanese academic, was a university professor and her Jamaican-born mother a nurse. The family moved to Britain when her father accepted a post

at Warwick University. Birbalsingh, then 15, attended a comprehensive, "which was so modern we called teachers by their first names", and won a place at New College, Oxford, to read French and philosophy.

She was motivated by her father's story to create Michaela. "He came from one of the poorest backgrounds, but still managed to make it. When I show my dad the books we are using at Michaela, he says, 'They are the classics I read as a boy.' The old-fashioned British education in British Guyana that helped my dad rise out of poverty is being denied to children in schools in this country."

She is driven, too, by the thought of all the children she has taught over the years who, despite being bright, will not succeed. "When you look at the statistics on who gets into Oxbridge or the City, or runs the country, they are not the children I taught in the past. I refuse to accept that because of poverty they will not have these opportunities. Twenty per cent of kids leave school illiterate and innumerate. Only freedom from our current culture of low expectations will give children a way out."

That is why she deliberately sited her school in one of the poorest boroughs in the country. Birbalsingh says that her parents are overwhelmingly working-class and from ethnic minorities and that they understand, as do many immigrant families, the value of a good education and the importance of working hard. Middle-class families, by contrast, would balk at the level of discipline at Michaela, she suggests.

She is bracing herself for another backlash when *Battle Hymn* is published, yet remains determined to change minds and shake up the lazy culture she believes riddles too many schools in England.

Fittingly, on the wall of her office is a framed quotation from Gandhi. "First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." ■

*The children's names have been changed*

**"If parents are not supporting a child with his homework, they are not doing their job. It's our duty to tell them"**

To read an extended extract from *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers*, go to [Magazine at thesundaytimes.co.uk](http://Magazine.atthesundaytimes.co.uk)