

EDITORIAL

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## School Size: deepening the debate

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Like following life thro' creatures you dissect  
You lose it in the moment you detect  
Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays*

It is unlikely that anyone reading this issue of *FORUM* will not have a view about school size. Recent press coverage might suggest that this is a new debate. However, it comes as no surprise that the issue was well aired in an edition of *FORUM* published over 30 years ago. In an article headlined 'In Defence of Large Schools', Clyde Chitty, then second deputy head of a comprehensive school in south-east London, argued that 'our current preoccupation with the size of school issue is little more than thinly-disguised political propaganda, aimed at discrediting the comprehensive reform ... If big schools can be shown to be bad, *ipso facto* comprehensive schools are bad'.

Like everything that matters most in education, the subject of school size arouses the deepest of passions. In making claims about the virtues of small or large schools, the temptation to draw on personal experience is as understandable as it is irresistible – and sharing our experiences, and learning from the experiences of others is at the heart of co-operative learning. Simple enough, but it needs to be said, particularly in these days of hand-me-down learning. But far too often, the debate about school size takes generalising from the particular a step too far: research is often ignored, distorted or used selectively; sweeping claims are made on the basis of scanty evidence, and rhetoric rules the day. This can be dangerous stuff, particularly when school size becomes a political football.

*FORUM* readers may have noticed that New Labour has adopted a 'neutral' policy on school size, rightly, in my view, leaving it for local authorities to determine the pattern of school provision most appropriate to their area. This is not a decision plucked from the air. Five years ago, having

listened carefully to arguments promoted by the small schools lobby, the then Labour education minister Charles Clarke persuaded the Treasury to co-fund a systematic review of the literature on secondary school size. The findings, summarised in this issue by Mark Newman, make for interesting reading. However, the research team concluded that the study did not provide evidence to support national policy initiatives limiting secondary schools to a certain size. Subsequently, David Cameron and his shadow school ministers, David Willetts and, more recently, Michael Gove, have been quick to latch on to the popular appeal of 'small' and the political mileage to be gained from it. Drawing heavily on research from the United States, the Conservatives intend to require local authorities with 'failing' large schools to consider dividing those schools into smaller, autonomous units. The rationale for limiting this policy to so-called 'failing' schools is as perplexing as it is indefensible.

It is easy to despair of ways in which conversations about school size, conversations that deserve clear thinking and objective analysis, are reduced to headline-grabbing, oppositional arguments. 'Small is beautiful' is, of course, a gift for headline-writers. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine that Fritz Schumacher would be particularly happy with ways in which the title of his controversial and challenging analysis of the economic structure of the Western world in the early 1970s is being reduced to a neat sound-bite nearly 40 years on. It is, after all, a provocation based on a particular value position and supported by evidence, not a statement of absolute and unconditional truth. And as Oscar Wilde observed, the truth is rarely pure and never simple.

A quick glance through recent press articles on school size confirms the current fashion for casting small schools as the good guys and large schools as the baddies. While 'small' is couched in the homely and beguiling language of 'caring', 'supportive', 'sense of belonging', 'personalised' and 'community', big is characterised as 'overcrowded', 'alienating', 'impersonal', 'titan', 'controlling' and based on factory models of education. Sadly, these simplistic descriptions fail to do justice to the complexities of schools of different sizes, or indeed to the very individual and idiosyncratic differences within schools of a similar size. As the late John Tomlinson pointed out in his seminal study of six small secondary schools, *Small, Rural and Effective* (1990), 'these [six] schools are, in important respects, as different from one another as they are collectively from larger, urban schools' (p. 291).

At this point I cannot but help recall a visit to a two-teacher school nestled in a tiny village in South-West Cornwall. On the face of it the school was idyllic. It was shortly after the National Curriculum was introduced and claims were being made, wrongly as it happened, that small primary schools could not cope with the demands of a subject-based curriculum. I was ushered into the tiny staffroom-cum-office by the part-time caretaker who also doubled up as the school secretary. Something on the notice board caught my eye. Signed by the head teacher and heavily underlined, it read: 'To all school staff – Remember to wash up your mugs and put them away up after you have used them'. No 'please' or 'thank you'. This struck me as a somewhat peculiar way of

communicating in such a small and deceptively close community. It later transpired that the head teacher and her 'staff' (i.e. the other teacher) had not been on speaking terms for six years – and that the caretaker-cum-secretary spoke to neither of them.

Similarly, I cannot help wondering whether the 500-strong primary school on a North London council estate at which I once taught had a stronger sense of community, and was more genuinely representative of the community it served, than the local village school now down the road. All save a tiny handful of children on the council estate went to their 'local' school. Choice was not really an option, nor indeed was it seen to be important. By and large the school was happy and well ordered – some would even say progressive – and it served a vibrant and supportive community. So far as representing the community is concerned, the opposite is true of my local village school. For the (mostly well-heeled) parents in the village, the choice is between a variety of independent fee-paying pre-prep and prep schools and, for those with the transport and time, the two-form-entry Church of England school three miles away. Sadly, it is mainly those who have no choice who attend the (excellent) local village school. Putting size to one side, this vivid example, right on my doorstep, is a salutary reminder of the damaging ways in which 'choice and diversity' cement existing divisions based on wealth, class or a combination of the two.

As a strong supporter of the principles and practices of human-scale education, it was humbling when the editorial board of *FORUM* agreed that this special issue of the journal should focus on school size. The intention, however, is not to promote the case for small or large schools – and here, of course, much rests upon what we mean by 'small' and 'large' – but to think beyond the mantra of 'small is beautiful', to broaden and deepen the debate about why this might, or might not, be the case and to listen to, hear and learn from each other. It is, if you like, an antidote to the simplistic message that small is good and big is bad.

There are many messages to reflect upon. For me, perhaps the most important is Mary Tasker's timely reminder about the confusion of aims and purposes that, increasingly, characterises debates on school size. Nowhere is this more evident than in the current move towards creating 'mini-schools' or schools-within-schools in large secondary schools. As Mary illustrates, we can see that when used as a mechanism for labelling and categorising students, this growing trend could fly in the face of the comprehensive ideal, fragmenting and atomising educational provision even further, 'segregating' 11 year-olds into a thinly-disguised twenty-first-century version of the tripartite system and recreating a pecking order based on invidious notions of 'aptitude' and 'ability'. So, before talking glibly about the virtues of 'small' we need to ask deeper and more searching questions about educational aims and values.

People have been more than generous in contributing to this issue. They have done so with energy, integrity and imagination. What strikes me time and again is the commitment, courage and intellectual energy we devote to that

which is important to us as human beings and as educators – things that arouse our passions and help shape our beliefs. The messages about school size are, it seems to me, ambivalent, reflecting in part my own concern to capture the benefits of both large and small and to find more intellectually defensible ways of explaining that, while smaller learning communities have the potential to improve learning, size alone is not enough. Striking postures with generalisations simply will not do.

### References

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