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Smaller Schools: a conflict of aims and purposes?

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ABSTRACT This article tracks recent developments in the debate about secondary school size. It looks at the growth of the small schools movement in the United States and at initiatives currently underway in the United Kingdom. The article explores various strategies for reconfiguring secondary schools into smaller learning communities or 'schools within schools' and argues that the appeal of smaller learning communities in schools springs from very different value positions which need to be clearly articulated and publicly debated.

The first big schools of 2,000 or more students that were built across Britain in the 1950s symbolised the 'new dawn' of the comprehensive era (Simpson, 1974). It was claimed that, on the basis of size, they offered economies of scale and that the wide range of subjects they could offer would benefit young people of all abilities. It soon became clear that the second claim could not be upheld and that the supposed 'economies of scale' needed to be set against the growing numbers of disaffected and disengaged young people. By the 1990s it seemed that big schools were no longer 'fit for purpose'. Indeed, David Hargreaves in his prophetic Demos booklet, *The Mosaic of Learning* (1994), described them as a 'curious mix of the factory, the prison and the asylum' (p. 43). He concluded that, in their failure to adapt to a changing society, schools were 'protruding from the changed landscape like carcasses' (p. 56).

In the last year anxieties about the well-being of young people have intensified with the publication of the UNICEF Well-being report, which placed British children at the bottom of the well-being table (Bosley, 2007). One of the report's most worrying findings was that British school children ranked lowest when it came to finding their peers 'kind and helpful'. The response to this report and to other research reports from Save the Children and the Nuffield Foundation highlighted the 'toxic' nature of childhood in Britain today and pointed the finger at the school system (Bunting, 2007).

School size became an important issue in the public mind with the publication in November 2007 of the Teach First Report, *Lessons from the Front: 1,000 New Teachers Speak Up.* (Teach First is a charity that places 'top-tier graduates in tough inner-city schools for two years.) The chapter on 'School Structures: transforming urban complex schools into better learning communities' by Max Haimendorf & Jacob Kestner (both former Teach First teachers who have contributed to this issue of *FORUM*) attracted widespread media attention. It detailed the downside of large schools: teachers who could not know their students; teachers who did not know their students' other teachers; students who 'fell below the radar' because they were not known as individuals. For the authors of this chapter, the supposed advantages of big schools – namely the 'economies of scale' argument and the 'broad curriculum maximising opportunities' argument – failed to make up for the damage done to students' social and emotional development as well as their academic potential. The way ahead was clear: urban complex schools should be reformed and restructured into smaller, autonomous learning communities which 'will better foster the subtle and complex human interactions that are at the heart of the educational journey' (p. 24).

These claims were made even more strongly by James Wetz, a former head teacher of two comprehensive schools, one a large inner-city school. In his film entitled *The Children Left Behind*, screened by Channel 4 in their *Dispatches* series in February 2008, Wetz argued that large schools do not meet the needs of many young people. From his own experience and after visiting successful small schools in Boston and New York, Wetz made the case for small schools, arguing that they are not only a viable option but an essential educational provision if Britain is to solve the problems of disaffected youth.

Only in February 2008, in response to an enquiry to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Public Enquiry Unit, did the Government make a formal statement on school size when it announced its position to be 'neutral' (DCSF, 2008). Up to this point the Government had seemed equivocal, with former Secretary of State for Education Estelle Morris – following a visit to the USA in 2002 to see the Boston small schools experiment – floating the idea of breaking up large schools into smaller units (Arkin, 2002) and in 2004 with Tony Blair announcing that the Labour Government was considering plans to create 'schools within schools' on the American model (Shaw, 2004).

In a response to the Teach First report, in 2007 Lord Adonis, the Schools Minister, referred once again to the American model, stating that cities such as New York had transformed test results, behaviour and attendance by cutting down the size of schools (Arkin, 2007). He could have added Boston, where the Boston Pilot Small Schools have achieved remarkable success, or Chicago, where small schools form part of Mayor Daley's Renaissance 2010 Project, or San Francisco, Sacramento, Baltimore, Denver, Colorado and a host of other urban centres.

Some of these US small schools are Charter Schools and enjoy a measure of independence from their school boards. Others are public high schools, as in Boston, where local schools boards have granted the Pilot Small Schools autonomy in their budgets, staffing arrangements, curriculum and assessment, governance and school structure. The purpose of the Boston Pilot Schools is to serve as models of innovation and as research and development laboratories. Their focus is on student learning and on how to engage all students by experimenting with enquiry-based learning and alternative forms of assessment.

In this country, while the Government has prevaricated, for the past 10 years the educational charity Human Scale Education has consistently been making the case for the restructuring of large comprehensive schools into small learning communities or 'mini-schools'. Human Scale Education's position is that small schools and small learning communities not only succeed in raising standards of achievement and behaviour, they make possible the changes in teaching and learning and in the organisation of schools that enable all children to succeed.[1]

In order to raise greater awareness among teachers in the UK, Human Scale Education has led groups of head teachers and deputies to Boston and New York to see small schools in action and has reported on the success of these schools in harnessing the energies and potential of students from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds. It has presented evidence to Charles Clarke who, as Secretary of State for Education, promised funding to take forward the 'schools within a school' concept, and more recently to Jim Knight, Minister of State for Schools and Learners.

These efforts have produced results. The funding for taking forward research into 'schools within a school' was made available by the (then) DfES Innovation Unit for a research project to be conducted in 2005-2006 at Bishops Park College, Jaywick, Clacton, the first secondary school in the twenty-first century to be built on the 'schools within a school' model (Fielding et al, 2006).

Bishops Park began its life as a 'three schools in one', 11-16 comprehensive school in 2001. Each small school has 300 students, its own head teacher and members of staff, and the teaching and learning takes place in mixed-ability groups within the separate schools. Facilities like the dining hall and sports hall are shared. There are no corridors in this architecturally innovative school and no staff room. Under its founding Principal, Mike Davies, Bishops Park has become the pioneer of the small schools movement in the UK and the flagship school for Human Scale Education's Secondary Schools Project (Davies, 2005). In 2006 it became a mentor school for the Human Scale Schools Project which developed out of the Secondary Schools Project.[2]

Bishops Park College is not just a reconfigured school. It is genuinely transformatory in terms of curriculum, timetabling and pedagogy and is described on the QCA Futures website as 'a new secondary school that has taken the opportunity to create an innovative curriculum that is inspiring, meaningful and fun'. Since each student is taught by a small team of teachers it

is possible to build relationships that enable each young person to be known as an individual. There is a sense of community and ownership in this school where no students are vetted for entry, where no student has been permanently excluded, where there have been no teenage pregnancies and where only two per cent of last year's leavers have not gone into employment or training. Some members of staff who left the school to work elsewhere soon returned, and throughout the five years that Mike Davies was Principal, he had virtually no supply budget – perhaps an indication of the commitment of staff to the school.

The most recent Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) report on the College (Ofsted, 2007) acknowledged that students 'show positive attitudes to learning' and 'particularly value the close, positive and supportive relationships' that they have with their teachers and other staff. It also noted that many students had told the inspectors how happy they were at the school. Parents were also highly supportive. However, the school's failure to reach the required 30 per cent A*–C at GCSE led to a searching debate about priorities and social policy. Given the school's location in the third most deprived area in England (*Clacton Gazette,* 2007) – on a list of the 50 worst Lower Super Output Areas (only the Speke ward in Liverpool and the Harpurhey ward in Manchester were considered to be more deprived) – the school's first priority was to raise aspirations and create a model community. According to Ofsted it had achieved these objectives. The severe distorting of the school's intake and the resulting impact on the school's external examination results is echoed in the chief schools adjudicator's plea for school catchment areas to be redrawn to force a more socially mixed education system (Curtis & Wilby, 2008). Without a comprehensive intake the tension that exists between two sets of indicators – on the one hand, external test results and on the other, student well-being – will be forever institutionalised into our school system, with the waste of talent and crushing of aspiration that this implies. In this regard the desire of nearly all students at Bishops Park to continue their education post-16 is quite remarkable.

The experience of Bishops Park has highlighted the tension over the aims and purposes of our education system, a tension apparent in the applications for funding made to the Human Scale Schools Project by schools who wish to restructure into smaller learning communities. These schools are situated in a market education system where success is synonymous to position in the league tables and where the losers certainly don't take all. The constraints of the National Curriculum – notwithstanding developments in the new secondary curriculum – and the pressure of high-stakes testing do not lead to success for large numbers of students. It could be said that small learning communities offer a solution in segregating out these students into special 'nurture groups', or alleviating the academic pressure of the subject curriculum by 'themed days' while carrying on as normal for the rest of the time. Mixed-age, vertical tutoring groups can provide support for students without changing very much the nature of teaching and learning or indeed the nature of the curriculum. But if schools are genuinely committed to the values of democracy, social justice and

fairness, and respect for all, it could be argued that strategies for 'segregating' particular groups of students merely fudge the issue of rethinking education and reconfiguring schools in ways that live out these values.

The idea of smaller learning communities is now catching on. However, it is becoming clear that, as the movement grows, so new questions arise – including issues relating to selection and elitism. For example, in the United States, under the rubric of 'choice', some small schools are promoting themselves as geared to particular careers or trades while others are offering academic courses as their speciality. This is just another form of selection and is certainly not what the founders of the American small school movement – Debbie Meier and Ted Sizer – envisaged. While both these educators would embrace vocational education as a means of enabling children to 'use their minds well', they would expect schools to engage all young people, whatever their skills and talents, in vocational 'subjects' on the grounds that such studies can develop the learner's intellectual as well as practical abilities. The idea of the 'common school' remains strong in America.

In the UK there are signs that similar forms of segregation are emerging. The Studio Schools planned by the Young Foundation with government support will be small, innovative, vocational schools for 14-19 year-olds disaffected with mainstream schooling. Crown Woods School in Eltham, in its new persona of Avery Hill Collegiate and opening in 2009, will consist of four 'colleges' of around 300 students, each one catering for students of different 'abilities'. One college will offer vocational training in trades such as bricklaying, two will 'specialise' in humanities and biological and medical science, and the fourth will be for the 'top' 25 per cent of the so-called ability range. This will be in effect a grammar school. Crown Woods is claiming the advantages of small learning communities – described on the school's website as close relationships between staff and pupils and a more intimate and personalised education for pupils – and at the same time segregating these pupils into different 'ability' groupings.

Such overt forms of segregation based on a particular view of young people and their future role in society are not as typical in the school restructuring movement as the strategies used to 'rescue' young people from the cycle of low aspiration and disaffection that James Wetz explored in his Channel 4 film. The ARK academies have gained much publicity for their small school strategies dedicated to enabling disadvantaged inner-city children to succeed. ARK (Absolute Return for Kids) is headed by multi-millionaire Arpad Busson of hedge fund fame. It plans to have seven Academies up and running by the end of 2008. The first, Burlington Danes in West London, opened in 2006. These Academies will be schools of around 1,000 students broken down into four autonomous 'colleges' of 250 students, each with its own head teacher and 15 teachers working together as a team. The advantages of small scale are combined with a rigorous discipline programme and a curriculum rooted in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. ARK discipline policy is based on KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), used by American charter schools to boost

achievement. At Burlington Danes children are trained to look the teacher in the eye and shake hands with the teacher on entering class. For many this is a controversial approach smacking of a crude behaviourism. But as Alan Johnson discovered when, as Education Secretary of State, he visited a KIPP school in Washington, DC, it produces 'results' in terms of behaviour and test scores.

The futuristic Thomas Deacon Academy in Peterborough designed by Norman Foster is another example of a 'results-driven' initiative. An 11-18 school of 2,200 students costing £50 million to build under the Building Schools for the Future programme, it is subdivided into six 'colleges' named after different curriculum areas such as humanities, arts and communications. Each college has about 350 students and has its own reception area, a showcase area for work and colour for ties. The colleges are vertical pastoral care units where young people of mixed ages meet together each day. It is claimed that the feelings of intimacy and safety that the colleges are supposed to engender will enhance the confidence of students and enable them to achieve academically. This is the school that has been built with no playground as a precaution against bullying and disorder.

Frank Green, Chief Executive of the Leigh Technology Academy in Dartford, Kent, is another head teacher who has been influenced by the American experience. He has taken the idea of vertical units further. Convinced of the link between size and delinquency he has broken up his large school into four small schools each with its own principal and core staff. The new state of the art building consists of four main blocks, one for each school, with shared facilities adjacent. The core academic departments have been split into four teams each with full responsibility for key stage 3 and key stage 4 students. Frank Green believes that young people learn best from other young people about two years ahead of them and that in a smaller learning environment it is possible to develop the relationships between young people that enable this kind of learning to take place.

The small school movement has reached a critical point. There is a growing feeling among teachers, parents and the general public that the large comprehensive school has had its day and that we are beginning to see the death of the factory school model. And while the Government appears to be supporting the creation of supersize schools – their numbers have increased dramatically over the past 10 years – in the sense that they are colluding with the policies of local authorities, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have voiced their support for smaller scale schools.

Yet there remains a confusion of aims underpinning the move to restructure large secondary schools. It is generally agreed that 'many students need to belong to a smaller, more intimate unit within the school, where stronger relationships between teachers and students and among the students can be forged' (Hargreaves, 2007) but there is no real agreement as to the underlying purpose. At one end of the spectrum Human Scale Education sees the 'schools within a school' model as a necessary step towards a fundamental transformation of education, a transformation that must start with questions

about values and first principles, rather than the best way of 'delivering' what has been prescribed. At the other end are those who wish to maintain the system as it is with surface tinkering in the form of smaller units that can shape and control behaviour and enable young people to achieve better test and examination results. Until this largely unacknowledged conflict over aims and purposes is properly addressed we will not develop a coherent alternative to the current system of large schools and league tables which is failing so many of our children and young people.

Notes

[1] Human Scale Education is an educational reform movement committed to small-scale learning communities. It sees its core values of 'respect for self and others', 'democracy', 'social justice and fairness' and 'sustainability' as underpinning relationships within a school community and informing the practice of the school. http://www.hse.org.uk

[2] The Human Scale Schools project is now in its third year. Thirty-four schools are already on board and it is intended to recruit a further six. The project is a partnership between Human Scale Education and the Gulbenkian Foundation, with support from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. It aims to promote and support secondary schools who subscribe to the values underpinning a human scale education and who see restructuring into smaller learning communities as a means to bring about a more life-affirming and successful experience of schooling for all young people.

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