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Envy of a Bigger One: moving beyond phoney debates on school size

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ABSTRACT In this article Geoff Barton argues that the debate about large versus small schools is a largely phoney one that misses the essential point about the quality of provision. Using Michael Barber's international comparisons, he suggests that our focus should be on creating the conditions for teachers to teach as well as they can, and proposes that a streamlined staffing structure would help to regain this focus. He says that large schools are best placed to lead this change rather than fighting rearguard campaigns in the big versus small debate.

In 1987, with the cold war lingering into its final phase, the cartoonist Gerald Scarfe published a book of cartoons called *The Seven Deadly Sins*. There, in scabrous and vivid Technicolor, were the vices of the world played out. In one, a Mickey Mouse-eared Ronald Reagan was pitted against Gorbachev, the two of them brandishing their nuclear weapons in an obviously phallic fashion. The caption: 'Envy of a bigger one'.

The debate on the size of schools rarely seems to get beyond envy in most contexts. Most recently, Dr James Wetz, Visiting Fellow at Bristol University's Graduate School of Education, ignited a small-scale media-based controversy by warning in a Channel 4 *Dispatches* [1] programme that many of Britain's schools are too big. A teeny whipped-up newspaper storm ensued; well, less a storm, than a half-baked spat by columnists whose hearts didn't quite seem to be in it.

Thus the *Daily Mail* – never knowingly understated – proclaimed: 'Pupils who attend large schools are doomed to failure'. It shrieked: 'Dr James Wetz claims pupils could drift into crime because their behavioral and educational difficulties go unnoticed. In a Channel 4 documentary he calls for Britain to follow the example of the US and break up large secondaries into smaller '"schools within schools"'.[2]

The *Mirror* announced: 'A top academic reckons creating "schools within schools" would solve this by creating a closer bond between children and

teachers'. The former head says: 'In America, these small schools have better attendance, higher grades and more parents want pupils to get into them'.[3]

Enter the *Daily Telegraph*: 'Large secondary schools are "failing children". Children are being failed in large secondary schools as behavioural and educational problems go unnoticed, a leading academic claims. Even bright pupils struggle in huge comprehensives because they get less attention from teachers, says Dr James Wetz, from Bristol University'.[4]

Ho hum. This is a peculiar ragbag of a controversy, designed, it seems, to provoke various reactions on disparate fronts. It takes an odd scattershot approach in a kind of desperation to ignite some kind of response.

Thus there are spiralling standards of behaviour (Dr Wetz says there are 200,000 young people with a criminal record, a 26 per cent increase in three years); declining academic standards (he reminds us that 38 per cent of those who leave school at 16 with no good qualifications were actually achieving decent results at the end of primary school, so it must be the fault of those big impersonal secondary schools they have to attend); there's the 'bright kids not getting noticed' story; even, for good measure, the perennial issue of closure of village schools.

The context for all of this is that the number of children being taught in schools of more than 2,000 pupils has increased fourfold under Labour. Almost 50,000 are now in what the tabloids call super-size comprehensives.

I'm not sure I can work myself into too much of a frenzy about this. When you Google the phrase 'large schools' you tend to get an outpouring of angst from sites in the USA where one might infer that a series of campus-based horrors has left a nation seeking causes – the apparent impersonality of large schools being one. Why, the subtext seems to be, didn't anyone spot the atrocity Kevin was about to inflict?

Similarly, it's fashionable now to exhort us to cast an envious glance across the North Sea towards Finland. Michael Barber's research for McKinsey – *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come out on Top* [5] – surveys the world's best school systems, such as Singapore's and Finland's, and compares them with the worst. You might expect it would make a point about large schools (USA) and compare then with small schools (Finland) to provide one explanation for the discrepancy in national performance.

In fact, size of school doesn't appear as an indicator of a system's success. It doesn't get a mention in this most comprehensive of research. Class size is a variant, but it doesn't necessarily play the way we might expect. Barber writes:

> Over the past five years every country in the OECD except for one has increased the number of its teachers relative to the number of its students. Yet the available evidence suggests that, except at the very early grades, class size reduction does not have much impact on student outcomes.[6]

At first, this feels counter-intuitive. How come those grand public schools achieve stellar results if it isn't attributable to classes of no more than a dozen?

Yet Barber's research suggests that the key ingredients in improving schools are: get the best people into the teaching profession; get them to focus on pedagogy; treat students as individuals. And the implication is that these can be done whatever the sizes of classes (South Korea averages class sizes of 36; Switzerland 19.1; the UK 24.3)[7], and in schools of whatever size.

Certainly the automatic link critics sometimes make between a school that is large and one that is impersonal is too easy, too simplistic and frequently misleading. We have all shopped in large supermarkets where the service was personal, welcoming and responsive, and in small corner shops where a surly grunt from the cashier was all you got if you were lucky. Similarly, I spent a week in Asia's biggest city, Shanghai, last autumn and felt throughout comfortable, welcomed and secure in a way that I might not in a random English market town on any Friday night.

Size doesn't equate to quality in any direct sense. I have always worked in large schools. The one where I began my teaching career, on the outskirts of Leeds, was a school of 1,700; my current school has 1,340 students. Both were good schools where we knew our students well. It was one of our characteristics.

What matters is how schools are organised within themselves, and larger schools do of course bring with them the resources to be able to organize into smaller units and provide more personalised resources.

So I don't really want to spend much time batting about the 'small schools good, big schools bad' stereotype. I'm not sure it gets us anywhere. There are good big schools and poor big schools, good small schools and poor small ones. That seems to me unarguable, if regrettable.

Instead, let's consider a different implication for large schools of Barber's international research. He does what John Cleese memorably described as 'stating the bleeding obvious': pointing out that good education is all about teachers. It's as simple as that.

This is more important than we think, because in large schools particularly we are prone to pay attention to organisational issues. Conscious of the need to ensure good communication, to make sure our students are known personally, to fight against a parental perception that big schools may be cold, we resort to systems designed to maintain good communication and to promote consistency of practice.

This means that unwittingly we have designed schools on a kind of industrial model, the underpinning rationale being one of 'let's control the workers'. This design isn't just to organise and control the students; it's the way traditionally we have felt we have had to deal with staff as well.

If there's a message from Barber's research, it's a reminder that if we recruit the right people as teachers in the first place (and in Finland 10 people apply for every post as a teacher), then train them well how to teach, we then just need to leave them to it. Barber points out that the national curriculum in Finland, the world's highest performing education system, has arguably the least

prescriptive curricula: 'We want teachers to be able to make their own choices'. How radical is that? The emphasis is on the integral professionalism of teachers.

Sometimes in our schools we forget that we have one of the best educated workforces of any profession. The old factory model of control feels outmoded and irrelevant, and possibly at its worst in large schools. At our school, for example, I send out a weekly circular to all teachers who are on management allowances (TLRs), plus members of the leadership team. In a staff of around 85 teachers, there are more than 50 recipients of the weekly newssheet – imagine the ratios there of managers to workers. Professor John West-Burnham's comment that schools are 'overmanaged and under-led' never felt more true.

When the Government forced through its introduction of teaching and learning responsibilities three years ago, it did so at an ill-advised breakneck pace which left many of us without the time to reflect on the genuine structures our schools needed. What becomes clear – in an age when good teachers no longer have to retreat from the classroom to gain decent pay progression – is that the top-heavy management structures of large schools look increasingly archaic. The invention of pastoral posts, middle management subject leader posts, a raft of co-ordinators – all of these have created a cluttered management structure in large schools. The problem is not that most of the people awarded these management points don't deserve them; rather it's that the structures aren't fit for purpose – they don't help students to learn better.

Why, for example, do we need heads of sociology, psychology, general studies; or co-ordinators of key stage 3 English or post-16 maths? Isn't the lesson from international research that the key to good schools is getting good teachers into the classroom – little more than that? Doesn't a heavy emphasis on management actually gravitate against it?

Shouldn't we therefore be thinking beyond subject compartmentalisation, making links across subject boundaries, looking at the generic skills of what great teachers do – setting high expectations, explaining, asking questions, getting students to do the main work in any lesson?

Shouldn't we have fewer staff on leadership allowances and employ a smaller number of specialists with the time and training to do the job properly? Shouldn't their role essentially be a coaching one, working with teachers to improve their practice, linking them up across subjects with other teachers, focusing relentlessly on pedagogy?

Large schools have the resources, the self-confidence more easily to take this leap of faith, to break away from the tyranny of old management habits, and instead to reinvent themselves as modern organisations more readily attuned to dealing with chaos than imposing control.

If what we need in the classroom is great teachers, let's make all of our systems flow out from that – to a small number of light-touch coaches and leadership team members who recognise effective pedagogy, know when to intervene and when to stand back and – in a significant shift from old practices – when to do things differently. As Bill Clinton said: 'If we do what we've always done, we'll get what we've always got'.

Large schools can afford to take more risks, to push back some boundaries and to reinvent themselves. It's one way that we can show the distinctiveness of our large schools, the remorseless emphasis on doing things better, and in the process avoid allowing ourselves to get bogged down in a petty squabble about whether size signals any more in reality than the nature of mindset of the person who is talking. It is, literally, small-minded.

Notes

[1] *Dispatches*, Channel 4, February 11, 2008.

[2] *Daily Mail*, February 11, 2008.

[3] *Daily Mirror*, February 11, 2008.

[4] *Daily Telegraph*, February 11, 2008.

[5] Barber, M. & Mourshed, M. (2007) *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come out on Top*. London: McKinsey & Co.

[6] Ibid., p. 14.

[7] OECD (2005), cited in 'Weaker Pupils Worst Hit by Big Class Sizes', *The Guardian*, March 24, 2008.

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