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# School Structures: transforming urban complex schools into better learning communities

MAX HAIMENDORF & JACOB KESTNER

ABSTRACT This article, which forms part of the policy booklet *Lessons from the Front* written by participants and Ambassadors of the Teach First scheme, argues that educational outcomes are often adversely affected by the size and structure of many urban complex schools. Rather than multiplying the efforts of teachers, too often the organisational model of these schools works against them, militating against the development of effective teacher-student relationships. For many teachers, the fruits of their efforts are 'merely' that the world does not fall down around their ears: not too many fights occur, expulsions are kept to a minimum and there are just enough GCSEs at A*-C. Clearly this is not good enough. The article considers how organisational structures in urban complex schools can work to multiply teachers' efforts, creating learning communities that foster more positive educational outcomes.

## Think Horizontally

Educational outcomes are measured on a subject-by-subject basis, but the skills that pupils require for success are often cross-curricular. With grades awarded for pupils' performance in subject areas, academic structures in most schools are predominantly departmental and vertical. Subject departments are responsible for the education of pupils as they progress throughout the school, from one set of examinations to the next.

'Vertical' departmental structures can obstruct cross-curricular learning. For example, a Year 7 pupil will require essay writing skills in most subjects, but vertical departmental structures do not enable or encourage a teacher in one subject to explicitly reinforce the skills that pupils have learnt in others. Without structures that facilitate a consistent and coordinated approach to teaching and learning, pupils are often obliged to start from scratch in each subject they study, with the result that they may have little sense of their overall

progress, or of how the components of their learning interrelate and reinforce one another.

Vertical departmental structures can also undermine accountability. Whilst each teacher is responsible for a pupil's learning in a particular subject area, no teacher is responsible for the pupil's overall education. This is at least partly because teachers are trained, employed and managed to teach a particular subject, and their performance, like that of their pupils, in measured in subject grades.

Where each pupil is taught by perhaps 14 different teachers, it is difficult to know, let alone regularly speak to, all of the different staff involved. Indeed, only 17 per cent of Teach First teachers agreed with the statement 'I know who my pupils' other teachers are'. Form tutors and year teams' 'horizontal' responsibilities could counterbalance this. But in practice they spend far less time with their designated cohorts than with the pupils they teach in their subject departments. Moreover, assessing a pupil or year group's performance at any given point would require consultation with up to a dozen departments and, in the case of a year group, most of the teachers in the school. Form tutors cannot have meaningful information about their 'tutees' at their fingertips because to do so would require an impossible level of regular communication with almost every other teacher. The time required to identify a pupil dropping behind is therefore often measured not in days or even weeks, but in months if not in whole school terms.

The following description of a form tutor's day, by a Teach First teacher in North London, gives some idea of the challenge:

> My day officially starts at 8.30 in the morning, at which point all the staff gather for a short general briefing. At 8.40 the bell rings and I rush off to my tutor group, who I will keep until 8.55. We have only three morning registration sessions, the other two are assemblies. Altogether the total amount of time a form tutor sees their tutor group in a week is an hour and 15 minutes, but the stop-start nature of these times makes it hard to use them effectively. After carrying out administrative tasks, on days when it's not too hectic I sometimes manage to do brain gyms with them or hand out work booklets. It's only then that I can speak to individual pupils about their work or behaviour, otherwise I have no choice but to ask them to stay after school for five minutes.
>
> For six lessons I don't see them again, then at 15.00 they're back in my class. On days when we have a lot of time, I make an effort to praise pupils individually. However, on days when we don't it's a 'Well done to all of you for having a good day … you can go,' followed by 'Pupil X, Y, Z please stay back so I can discuss your behaviour'. And out they go for another day.

## Crushed by Numbers

The problems we have identified in schools' vertical departmental structures are, for many of the schools Teach First teachers work in, compounded by the sheer size of the institution and the number of pupils for whom each teacher has partial responsibility. The average number of pupils in a Teach First school is 1,056 and Teach First teachers in their first year are responsible for an average of 187 pupils.

There are two main arguments in favour of larger schools; the first is the conventional 'economies of scale' argument. This is based on the fact that there are important fixed costs in running a school and that increasing pupil numbers will reduce the cost per pupil. This is an oft-cited but potentially misleading argument. Larger sizes can often generate disproportionate coordination costs, such as those incurred for large numbers of support staff. Even more important than the cost is the tendency for very large organisations to find that their size obstructs the delivery of the very outcomes they are created to achieve, as diseconomies of scale begin to emerge. An argument for large schools based purely on cost fails to take into account cost-effectiveness, value for money, or the cycle of innovation.

The second main argument in favour of large schools is that they are able to provide a broader curriculum and, by providing access to specialist teachers, a more stimulating and varied educational experience. However, for larger schools this is more often an aspiration rather than something that is actually achieved. Large schools are too often anonymous – stultifying rater than stimulating – and the strength of passionate specialists can be diluted by the reality of working through many procedural cobwebs and blockages. Furthermore, a broad curriculum is worthless if it is taught ineffectively and the basics are not mastered.

School size can also impair a school's capacity to implement creative initiatives, or to respond to unexpected problems. When teachers are managing a large number of relationships with staff and an ever larger number of relationships with pupils simply to get through the day, there can be little scope for them to become the 'reflective practitioners' they need to be if they are to do their jobs well. Short-termism and fire-fighting can quickly take precedence. Little wonder then that teachers – and their students – can remain chained to the textbook. In many urban complex schools, teachers' time and energy are simply spread too thinly between too many pupils.

## Why Relationships Matter

The effect of vertical departmental structures, coupled with the size of many large urban schools, has an adverse impact on relationships. This, in turn, affects educational outcomes. In this article we are particularly concerned with the impact of size and vertical structures on the relationships that shape the pastoral environment in which learning takes place.

## The 'Ammunition Run'

This was the name given to the several-times-a-day dash a London school's humanities teachers made from their classrooms to the photocopying room on the other side of the school. Crossing the school, the teachers saw a wide variety of misbheaviour in the corridors and, inevitably, they became embroiled in trying to resolve all sort of low-level disruption. Where a teacher actually knew the pupil who was misbehaving, that is, where there was a relationship of some sort between them, the teacher would have a good chance of being able to address that pupil by name and have some awareness of how to deal with the pupil in such a way that the situation would be diffused. In turn, the pupil would be more likely to respect the authority of the teacher.

With the overwhelming majority of pupils, however, any intervention would not be effective. The chances of a minor incident escalating were high and the incident would require a disproportionate amount of time to resolve. The increased likelihood of such a situation escalating left teachers little alternative but to invoke formal disciplinary procedures. This in turn created a sizeable time commitment over and above their timetabled work.

The 'ammunition run' is but one example of a wider problem faced by large schools with structures that tend towards depersonalised interactions. Teachers in urban complex schools constantly interact with pupils they neither teach nor know as they move between classrooms, cover for lessons, take lunch duties or support other members of staff. We should not underestimate the scale or extent of this problem: the way that staff and pupils are able to move around the school, the manner in which pupils and staff interact, are vital components of a positive educational environment.

A similar situation could be described in respect of the responsibility for positive pastoral intervention. When teachers find themselves in contact with pupils who they know little or nothing about, it is very difficult for such intervention to be effective. Form tutors face the same problem when they find themselves constantly short of time to engage effectively with their form.

## Creating Structures that Foster Relationships: exclusive communities of learning

It may seem self-evident that the solution to many of the problems outlined above is simply to reduce the size of schools. However, the evidence to support this is inconclusive. Studies on the relationship between school size and achievement in secondary schools in England and Wales suggest that attainment actually increases with school size up to around 1,200, and then tails off. The evidence base is also distorted by the fact that, in some cases, small schools are in fact previously large schools that have become smaller because they are unpopular and perceived to be 'failing'.

It is illuminating to compare experience in the UK with that in the USA. From the mid-twentieth century the USA experienced a rapid increase in the size of high schools, not dissimilar to that recently experienced in England over

the past decade or so. In the USA this resulted in the creation of large numbers of smaller schools, including 'schools-within-schools', i.e. small schools within a larger campus. This movement has been fostered in part by the introduction of Charter Schools, which have considerably more autonomy than many other schools.

Early studies highlighting the successes of the first generation of new small schools in the USA made arresting claims, including improved attendance, behaviour and academic results. However, as smaller schools have been introduced more widely a more complex picture is emerging. In Chicago, for example, which boasts a strong 'small schools' movement, improvements in attendance and pupil attitudes have yet to be translated into significant gains in examination grades.

Having considered the available evidence, we have come to the view that, whatever their size, it is important that schools adopt the 'characteristics of smallness'. It is not, we believe, the size of the school that counts, but the size of the learning communities within them.

The key to small learning communities is a greater degree of 'exclusivity' in the educational relationships between pupils and teachers. Encouraging pupils to engage in more 'exclusive' interactions with a defined group of peers, rather than leaving them at sea to find their own identity in an institution of 1,000 plus students, would be a huge step towards overcoming the anonymity that is too often created by vertical organisational structures and the sheer size of many schools. If this were mirrored by giving teachers a defined group of colleagues and pupils with whom to work, large secondary schools could begin to create smaller communities that genuinely foster learning.

In the light of their experiences in complex urban schools, Teach First teachers firmly believe that creating small learning communities within large schools will greatly improve educational outcomes. Such communities would ensure that pupils are known as individuals, making it harder for anyone to fall under the radar. Small learning communities would allow for all data on pupils, including information about attendance, academic attainment and the individual pupil's wider achievements, to be understood and analysed in context. Response and intervention would be rapid and effective. The logistical and organisational barriers that prevent staff meeting together on a regular and frequent basis in order to plan cross-curricular work would be removed and staff could ensure a consistent approach towards effective monitoring and intervention.

It is important that leaders of these small learning communities be charged with the responsibility to build a strong ethos that reflects and reinforces that of the wider school, including the development of innovative approaches to meet the educational and pastoral needs of their pupils.

### The Role of the Form Tutor: an advocate and 'account manager'

Within these smaller learning communities, the form and its form tutor should become the basic unit of school organisation and accountability. This will require considerable change to both the role of form tutors and the way in which they are managed and held accountable. Form tutors should be held accountable for their role as coordinator, advocate and account manager for a class of pupils – and empowered properly to fulfil this role. The form tutor should be explicitly tasked with maintaining and managing positive relationships with the pupils in her or his form, and with their parents. They could be line-managed within a horizontal organisational structure, which would counter the existing emphasis on departmental performance in many secondary schools. A corollary of this considerably widened job description for form tutors would be the provision of appropriate rewards for excellence in this role.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations on how schools can achieve the characteristics of smallness are in two groups:

- structuring schools as small, exclusive learning communities;
- renewing the role of the form tutor as an advocate and 'account manager'.

## Conclusion

We believe that the current organisational structures of urban complex schools do not do justice to, or multiply, the efforts of the teachers who work in them. They should. We believe such schools should be reformed so that, rather than promoting departmental 'silos' as the main organisational structure, priority should be given to creating small learning communities where pupils are valued as individuals, and where their learning and social development is seen as being paramount. The most effective way of accomplishing this in large urban schools is the adoption of the 'characteristics of smallness'. In doing this, we believe schools will better foster the subtle and complex human interactions that are at the heart of the educational journey.

## Notes

A longer version of this article was first published in the Teach First policy booklet *Lessons from the Front: 1,000 new teachers speak up* in 2007.

Teach First is a charity that recruits and trains high-achieving graduates to provide leadership, motivation and teaching to students in urban complex schools, whilst developing their own leadership skills and capabilities. Beyond the initial two-year programme, graduates are actively encouraged to remain

engaged with the Teach First mission to address educational disadvantage through the Ambassador Programme. To find out more, please visit: http://www.teachfirst.org.uk.

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**MAX HAIMENDORF** worked in a West London secondary school for three years, where he was Head of Year 8. He was one of the first cohorts of Teach First, a charity which places top graduates in challenging urban schools. He now works for a strategy consultancy firm, and continues to read and write on the issue of small schools.
*Correspondence*: Max Haimendorf, King Solomon Academy, Penfold Street, London NW1 6RX, United Kingdom (max.haimendorf@teachfirst.org.uk).

**JACOB KESTNER** was also a member of the Teach First programme. He taught history and politics, and was Deputy Head of Year 8, in a school in Enfield. He now works for the brand strategy consultancy Promise Corp. and is a member of the Teach First Ambassador Board. He tells anyone who'll listen that our schools need to be smaller.
*Correspondence*: Jacob Kestner, Teach First, 14 Heron Quay, Canary Wharf, London E14 4JB, United Kingdom (jacobkestner@hotmail.com).

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