
Does Size Matter? A Primary Perspective

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ABSTRACT The article discusses some of the arguments and values underlying the issue 'Does size matter?' Using findings from inspection evidence (his own and others') the author explores possible answers to the question as it applies to primary education in England. He concludes that in determining whether 'size matters' evidence has to be considered and weighed in relation to values. He provides his own evaluation.

Introduction

'Does size matter?' is not a question with a clear-cut answer. This is partly because of the lack of sufficient reliable inspection and research evidence about the effects of school size – though there is plentiful anecdotal evidence from personal experience, as witnessed in part by this article. A more fundamental reason for the difficulty in answering lies in that word 'matter'. What 'matters' depends on what is valued, and in a contested area such as education those involved in the small school debate in Britain differ as to what matters because of the values they hold. This article discusses the question in relation to evidence from English primary education and arbitrarily designates small schools as those with below about 100 children on roll. However, the general thrust of the argument (though not necessarily its detail) is also likely to be applicable to the issue of size in secondary education discussed in more detail elsewhere in this issue.

'Does size matter?' – No, if you value *pupil attainment* (as 'measured' by test results in England) as the major, or at least a major, consideration in answering the question. Whatever the inadequacies of the current testing system (and there are many), the results are used by policy makers to make decisions which affect the fate of schools but in this case they cannot, and should not, be used for or against small schools. An Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) survey (1999) revealed no significant differences between small and larger primary

schools in 'measured' attainment at the end of both key stages, once socio-economic circumstances had been taken into account. Some years later an unpublished departmental survey (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003) into attainment in year 6 came to similar conclusions. There is no reason to believe that the current situation is any different.

'Does size matter?' – **No**, if you value *breadth of curriculum entitlement* as a major factor. Despite confident assertions to the contrary made by critics of small schools at the time of the introduction of the National Curriculum, there is no inspection or research evidence to suggest that small primary schools fail to provide children with their full entitlement to the National Curriculum or that their teaching staff as a whole do not have the subject expertise to meet those requirements. There is plentiful inspection and anecdotal evidence of the flexibility and ingenuity shown by small schools in deploying semi-specialist expertise. My own research in Cumbria (Richards, 1998) revealed what I called 'the confident domestication' of the National Curriculum by head teachers (and other staff) who, since they were personally teaching it daily, were able to interpret the requirements with a strong degree of flexibility, which often included a measure of deliberate subversion! That flexible and creative subversion has also undoubtedly characterised the implementation of the national strategies and of synthetic phonics in many small primary schools.

'Does size matter?' – **Yes**, if you value *financial economy* and *cost-effectiveness* as major considerations in any response. The accepted wisdom is that smaller schools have higher unit costs than larger schools and that the cost per pupil rises as the school gets smaller. The 2003 DfES survey referred to above confirmed that view. It reported that the highest budget shares per pupil were found in primary schools with fewer than 100 pupils. At that time the median figure for an under-100 pupil school was nearly £2,600 per pupil compared with around £2,000 per pupil in schools with more than 300 pupils. There is no evidence to suggest that in 2008 the situation is any different. Determining *cost-effectiveness* involves complex value-laden judgements (as Ofsted inspectors have found to their cost). Nine years on there is no reason to contest the financial judgement reported in the 1999 Ofsted survey to the effect that 'by and large small schools spend what money they have wisely and effectively'.

'Does size matter?' – **Yes** (probably), if you value *teaching quality* as a crucial consideration. The 1999 Ofsted survey reported that the quality of teaching in small primary schools was generally better than in large ones. This was attributed in part to the teaching of the head teacher, which often had a very strong, usually positive, influence on the quality of teaching, the standards achieved and the general ethos of the school. Inspection findings from 2001-02 revealed that small schools had a higher proportion of very good or excellent teaching compared with other schools. Though not highlighted in Ofsted publications, other small-school factors contributing to teaching quality are

likely to include more flexible patterns of staff deployment, including greater use of semi-specialist teaching than in many larger schools (Richards, 1998); and, most powerfully, teachers' in-depth knowledge of individual pupils acquired in smaller classes over a longer period of time and leading to more 'personalised' teaching geared to meeting children's individual learning needs – which features so prominently in government rhetoric.

'Does size matter?' – Yes, if you value *community* in at least two senses. Though clearly large schools can create a sense of community (tellingly, often by creating small schools within larger ones), small schools are particularly successful in fostering a community ethos in which individuals have a sense of belonging and foster this in others. This is helped by the fact that children are likely to know more children beyond their age group in small schools with their mixed-age classes and the smaller number of pupils in all to get to know. In addition they have a greater chance of exercising responsibility, both for the younger children in their class and in the playground, and of participating more fully in the life of the school. Terms such as 'a positive ethos' and 'a family atmosphere' appear with impressive regularity in reports of small schools – symptomatic of the beguiling nature of so many of them. They also, of course, often make a very significant contribution to the life of their local communities not just in terms of retaining communities' demographic sustainability but by reflecting, and contributing to, the culture of the locality through shared experience such as displays, exhibitions, performances and environmental projects. More so than larger schools serving more disparate localities, small schools have greater potential as agencies of social cohesion on a local scale.

'Does size matter?' – Yes (probably), if you value children's *well-being*. This is more easily fostered in the 'human-scale' context of small learning communities with their combination of teachers' knowledge of individual children and their family circumstances; the greater possibility of meeting individual needs in smaller classes taught over a longer period of time; and closer links with, and greater involvement of, parents partly fostered by, and partly contributing to, that sense of community already referred to. Of course, larger schools can, and most do, foster children's well-being but it is that much harder without that almost 'natural' sense of community characterising most small rural primary schools.

Of course, all but the most perverse teacher/educationist would want to subscribe to the educational values of *pupil attainment* and *children's well-being*; would want schools characterised by *breadth of curricular entitlement* and *teaching quality*; would value a sense of *community*; and would want a system that was characterised by an appropriate degree of *financial economy* and *cost-effectiveness*. But, as discussed, these educational values play out somewhat differently in small- and large-school contexts.

In determining whether 'size matters' these values have to be weighed and some judged more important than others. That weighing process can only be undertaken in relation to more fundamental values and here organisations and individuals differ. For me at least, the key values of respect for self and others, participatory democracy, social justice and fairness, and sustainability that underpin the work of the charity Human Scale Education are more important than the values of individualism, efficiency, economy and technical rationality that underlie many aspects of current government education policy.

In relation to policy on small schools I find myself applying my own personal test which I use in relation to all government policies on education, i.e. 'Would I want it for my grandchildren?'. My answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article is 'Yes, size *does* matter'. Hence my strong preference for a small school education for Max and Charlie.

References

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