

SMALL SCOTTISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

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ABSTRACT

Twenty percent of Scotland's primary schools have fewer than 50 pupils each and these very small schools were the subject of research in 1996 and 2006 funded by the Scottish Government. This article draws upon findings from the follow-up conducted in 2006. It is based upon a postal survey of 100 very small schools and interviews in nine case study schools. Its aim is two-fold: first, to provide a profile of very small schools in Scotland; and second to identify the difficulties inherent in the role of teaching headteacher. By way of a conclusion, the author argues that although small schools may not be endangered, their structure and the role of their headteachers may have to change.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 20% (431) of the total number of primary schools in Scotland have school rolls of fewer than 50 pupils each (Scottish Executive 2006: 10). Many of these very small schools are led by *teaching headteachers*, who have developed a unique style to lead and manage their schools (Wilson & McPake 1998). This group of very small schools and the headteachers who lead them was the subject of follow-up research commissioned by the then Scottish Executive Education Department. It was begun in September 2006 and published in September 2007 (Wilson 2007). The purpose of this article is two-fold: first, it presents a 'snapshot' of the small schools that participated in the follow-up research, their number, size, and distribution and the changes that have occurred in the intervening ten years; second, it highlights the issues faced by teaching headteachers as they lead these very small schools. By way of discussion, the article poses the question: Can very small schools survive in a 21st century education system?

BACKGROUND

Small schools in Scotland

The background to the research lies in the fact that Scotland, in common with other small countries such as Norway, Finland, Sweden and New Zealand, has a large number of small schools. Interestingly, small schools in many countries are experiencing very similar pressures to those in Scotland created by demographic changes, curricular reforms, the need to make financial savings and the duality of the role of teaching headteacher (Webb & Vulliamy 1995). Although at least a third of all primary schools in Scotland are small, ie have pupil rolls of less than 100 pupils, they form the majority of primary schools in ten local authorities (ie Aberdeenshire, Angus, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway, Eilean Siar, Highland, Orkney, Perth and Kinross, Scottish Borders and Shetland). Despite the existence of so many small schools, there has been a paucity of funded research into small schools and how they might be developed and supported. Much of the existing literature has focused on English rather than Scottish schools and has reflected concerns about possible school closure (e.g. Galton 1993; Comber 1981), albeit there has been a Government presumption against the closure of rural schools in England since 1998. Latterly, however, school closure has also become a policy concern in Scotland (Georghious 2006). For example, at least two Scottish local authorities (Dumfries & Galloway and Scottish Borders) have now instituted automatic reviews, typically when a small school's roll drops below 25 and/or when the number of early years pupils falls below 10. Unfortunately, these communities, which these small schools serve, may already be experiencing a decline in traditional methods of employment in the farming, forestry and hydroelectric industries and the

closure of other services, such as post offices, shops and churches, so that schools are often perceived as the only remaining community resource.

Value for money?

At the time of the first research project in 1996, a new managerial discourse was beginning to permeate education in Scotland and many headteachers were expected to manage devolved school budgets. Thomas (1990) suggested that terms such as 'performance indicators', 'cost-effectiveness', 'value-for-money' and 'better use of existing resources' which resonate with market economics were beginning to be used in educational settings. However, the research evidence on the costs and benefits of closure of small schools is inconclusive (see for example, Bell & Sigsworth 1987; Coopers and Lybrand 1996). In general it was found that rural local authorities tend to have a higher unit cost per pupil than predominantly urban ones, as is the case in Scotland. For example, in 2006 Shetland spent £5,870 per primary pupil place compared to a Scottish national average of £3,537 (Georghious 2006). This is not necessarily a conclusive argument for closure on financial/economic grounds as the wider recurring costs of transport, boarding and the resultant, often unquantifiable loss to the community are difficult to cost in full economic terms, particularly in the long term. It is interesting here to note that some other countries, such as Sweden, appear to accept that part of the price paid for rural community sustainability will be a higher expenditure per student in sparsely populated areas (Aberg-Bengtsson 2001). In Scotland, Government guidance on possible school closure explained that local authorities should take account of a 'mix' and 'weight' of factors before making a case for school closure (Scottish Executive 2004a). These should include:

- the educational 'case';
- pupil travel distance and time;
- pupil and population projections;
- community planning;
- rural sustainability and development;
- urban communities and regeneration;
- financial considerations;
- other alternatives, including sharing management, teaching and other resources and facilities;
- 'unique' local factors.

However, the education case should always be key.

Yet, size does matter and earlier research on costs suggests that there may well be a threshold figure, viz. the number of pupils and teachers per school, below which costs rapidly escalate. For example, Galton (1993: 13) argued that 'schools with rolls of less than seventy pupils showed disproportions in costs per pupil with sharply escalating additional costs in schools with fewer than twenty-five pupils'.

Previous Scottish research

The 1996 research study (Wilson & McPake 1998) was the first full survey of all 863 small primary schools in Scotland and it explored the ways in which headteachers in small schools were managing change. In 1996, over 400 schools reported that no more than three teachers, including the headteacher, were employed in the school. Many of the sample headteachers perceived that there was little recognition at national level of their particular circumstances or of the support and professional development headteachers of small schools need to help them be effective. These headteachers also wanted induction programmes for all newly appointed small schools headteachers; curriculum development material which reflects variable composite classes; staff development opportunities which take account of the specific needs of headteachers in small schools and 'rust prevention'

programmes for the 44% who wish to spend the remainder of their teaching careers in small schools (Wilson & McPake 1998). Although this previous research was novel in that it focused exclusively on small schools, by 2006 it was out of date: the policy emphasis had shifted from managing schools to effective leadership and establishing values and an ethos of excellence (Scottish Executive 2005). These issues form the background to the current research.

THE RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODS

Aims

The overarching aim of the research that underpins this paper was to revisit a sample of the very small schools, which participated in a large-scale study of small schools undertaken between 1996 and 1998 (Wilson & McPake 1998). Specifically the research sought to identify:

- The characteristics of very small schools and the headteachers who lead them.
- Whether there is a particular leadership style evident in small schools.
- How leadership in small schools might better be supported.

Methods

The research employed a mixed methodological approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first phase of the research was based upon qualitative data drawn from interviews and observations undertaken in nine case study primary schools located in three different local authorities in Scotland. The second phase involved a postal survey of a sample of 100 small schools with pupil rolls of 50 or less, ten in each of ten local authorities in which small schools formed more than 50% of the total number of primary schools. These were drawn from the 2005 School Census returns (Scottish Executive 2006). Data were analysed thematically using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences and FileMakerPro. Percentages are derived from analysis of questionnaires and qualitative evidence from open responses on the questionnaires and interview evidence. Caution should, however, be exercised because in 1996 it was possible to include all 863 primary schools with fewer than 120 pupils and achieve an 82% response rate. In contrast in 2006, the research focused on the smallest Scottish schools, ie those with one to three teachers in 100 primary schools with fewer than 50 pupils each and achieved a 70% response rate. Therefore as the samples are not strictly comparable, the percentages provide only an indication of the differences between the findings from the two research studies.

Characteristics of the case study schools

The nine case study schools were purposefully chosen from the sample of schools in order to ensure that they were led by *teaching headteachers* (See Table 1). The smallest school (Case Study 7) had a roll of 7 pupils and the largest (Case Study 9) had 50 pupils. Four of the nine were located in remote rural areas according to the School Census classification and five were in accessible rural areas.

<i>Case</i>	<i>Council</i>	<i>Roll</i>	<i>No. of teachers</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>No. support staff hrs per week*</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>HT status</i>	<i>Gender</i>
1	D	9	1	Accessible rural	23 hrs	P1-7	Cluster non-teaching HT	F
2	D	24	2.3	Accessible rural	26 hrs	P1-7	Teaching HT	F
3	D	29	2.4	Remote rural	39 hrs	P1-7	Teaching HT	F
4	E	40	2.4	Remote rural	17 hrs	P1-7	Teaching HT	F
5	E	40	2.4	Accessible rural	15 hrs	P1-7 + nursery	Acting Teaching HT	M
6	E	30	2.4	Remote rural	9 hrs	P1-7+ nursery	Acting Teaching HT	F
7	G	7	1.3	Accessible rural	25 hrs	P1-7	Acting Teaching HT	F
8	G	36	2.3	Remote rural	20 hrs	P1-7	Acting Teaching HT	F
9	G	50	3	Accessible rural	72 hrs	P1-7+ nursery	Teaching HT	F

Table 1: An overview of the nine case study schools

* Some included clerical support, classroom assistants, and nursery assistants/auxiliaries

A PICTURE OF VERY SMALL SCHOOLS IN SCOTLAND

Schools size

All of the schools in the research reported here can be classified as very small by national Scottish standards. The smallest school in the sample of 100 very small schools had only three pupils and the largest 53 (see Table 2). Although the sample schools are very small, the majority of school rolls were reported to be either stable (48%, 31) or increasing (17%, 11). This is only a small decline from the total sample reported in 1996 when 51% were stable and 28% increasing.

<i>School rolls</i>	<i>No. of schools</i>	<i>% of schools</i>
<i>1-10</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>22%</i>
<i>11-20</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>17%</i>
<i>21-30</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>26%</i>
<i>31-40</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>17%</i>
<i>41-50</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>17%</i>
<i>Over 50</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1%</i>

Table 2: Number of schools in the sample by pupil roll (n=65)

Over a third of headteacher respondents in 2006 (35%, 23) indicated that their rolls were decreasing (See Figure 1.) It is, therefore, not surprising that over a third (35%, 23) of respondents agreed with the statement that ‘the threat of closure is never very far from our minds’. This uncertainty about a school’s future is likely to affect both teacher and community morale.

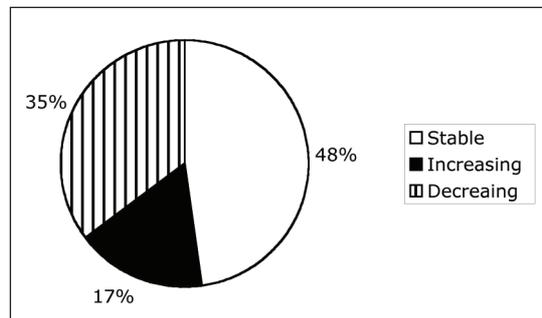


Figure 1: Stability of sample small school rolls (n=66)

Teacher numbers

The number of teachers, including the headteacher, in the sample small primary schools ranged from 1 to 4.5 full-time equivalent teachers (FTE). Six per cent (4) were single-teacher schools, which arguably is the most complex teaching challenge (viz coping alone with a range of leadership and managerial tasks while at the same time organising a curriculum for the widest age range of pupils). Twenty-six per cent (17) of headteachers indicated that they were supported by a part-time teacher (ranging from .2 to .9 FTE), while the remaining headteachers were supported by from 1 to 3.5 other teachers (see Table 3). As in 1996, the largest single group in the sample is the two-teacher school reported by 36% (24) schools compared to 29% in 1996.

<i>No. of teachers (fte)</i>	<i>No. of schools</i>	<i>% of schools</i>
1.0	4	6
1.1-1.9	17	26
2-2.9	36	55%
3.-3.9	8	12%
4-4.5	1	1
<i>Total</i>	66	100%

Table 3: Number of schools in sample with 1-4 teachers including headteachers (n=66)

Location

In general the smallest schools are often sited in the most remote localities. Seventy-four per cent (49) of responding headteachers indicated that their schools were located in rural areas with 24% (16) on islands, compared with only 2% (1) in a town (See Figure 2). In 1996 a significant minority 10% (72) of the sample schools were in urban or 'mixed' areas.

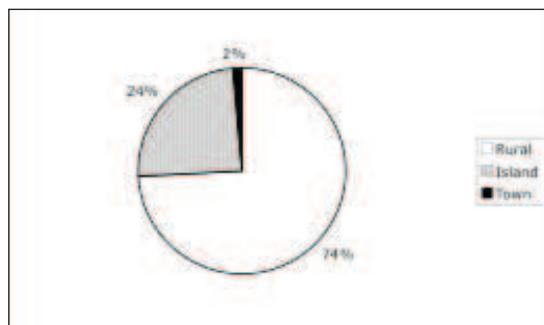


Figure 2: Location of the sample of small schools (n=66)

FIGURE 2

Thirty-nine per cent (26) of the 2006 sample headteachers described their schools as geographically isolated and a quarter of all respondents (16) associated geographical isolation with feeling more stressed. Although the 1996 and 2006 samples are not comparable, it is interesting to note that in 1996 a higher percentage of headteachers in 'mixed' or urban small schools had reported feeling isolated than did those in geographically isolated areas (58% in mixed areas compared to 52% in rural areas). This implies that geographical isolation is not necessarily associated with higher levels of reported stress amongst headteachers.

Facilities

Although most responding headteachers appeared to be satisfied with the accommodation generally, 14% (9) reported poor or inadequate accommodation, with 47% (31) dissatisfied with facilities for games/physical education (see Table 4). Compared to 1996, slightly fewer headteachers in 2006 were dissatisfied with their school's accommodation (14% in 2006: 17% in 1996), which may reflect school improvement programmes undertaken by local authorities in the intervening years. However, the definition of adequate may vary between headteachers in urban and rural schools and evidence from the nine case study schools demonstrates the paradigmatic shift that confronts those whose model of education is based upon larger, better resourced urban primary schools. All the case study schools were located in small 19th century school buildings, typically with two interconnecting classrooms, some had been refurbished (eg Case Studies 6, 8) and/or extended (Case Study 8) but others had what their headteachers considered to be inadequate facilities. For example, school houses were reported to be damp and unusable because the central heating had been removed (Case Study 5); class rooms were crowded or could only be accessed through other rooms (Case Studies 2, 3, 4); there was no separate dining room, staff room or headteacher's room (Case Study 5), and the local community hall had to be utilised for PE (Case Study 5). In some cases HMIe had already noted these faults and local authorities had responded by refurbishing classrooms and providing inside toilets. In other cases, headteachers had devised imaginative arrangements to extend curricular opportunities. For example, the headteacher in Case Study 6 had arranged for pupils to have swimming lessons in a local hotel's pool; some (eg Case Studies 4, 5, 6, 7) were able to utilise facilities in neighbouring secondary schools. A number of headteachers had created resource rooms or workspace for pupils and staff (Case Studies 1, 4,6,7), sometimes in former schoolhouses or corridors. Another had plans to install oil filled radiators, extend the accommodation, set up one of the rooms as a resource centre and create a room for the headteacher (Case Study 5). The lack of a full-time janitor was felt by all nine case study schools, and one described how she had to 'cope with everything from putting screws and nails in to putting the toilet seats on' (Headteacher, Case Study 3). This, then, is the picture of very small schools in 21st century Scotland which emerges from the questionnaire and case study evidence, conditions that are now rarely found in urban schools and which would challenge the most professionally competent headteacher.

LEADING VERY SMALL SCHOOLS

Duality of the role

A continuing theme in the literature on small schools reviewed in both 1996 and 2006 is the duality of the role of headteacher. Researchers (eg Wallace 1988; Way 1989; Galton 1993) found that both managing and teaching in smaller schools are significantly different from that in larger schools. The duality of the role of teaching headteacher and vertical grouping of pupils are factors with which all small school headteachers must cope. Dunning (1993: 83) summed up this 'double load' as 'the conflict that inevitably arises between the professional concerns of teaching, and the growing demands of management and leadership'. In 2006, this was still an issue for small school headteachers in Scotland, and it is not dissimilar to the situation in Queensland described by Clarke (2002: 1) who pointed out that 'the roles of teaching principal are numerous and diverse and likely to conflict with one another unless managed effectively'. These challenges, he suggests, can be more daunting for young, inexperienced principals, especially when compounded by the fact that many policy makers underestimate the contextual factors and rarely consider small schools as discrete elements in a diverse educational system.

This is also a theme taken up by Wilson and Brundrett (2005) who challenged the popular misconception that leading a small school is considerably easier than running a larger one. They argued that the difficulties inherent in the duality of the role of the teaching headteacher have been exacerbated by educational reforms, especially local management of schools, and

therefore, management and administrative tasks take their toll on the curriculum leadership part of the role of small school headteachers. Teaching vertical groups is demanding and requires fluid groups if it is to be effective. However, those who are also headteachers will have little time for the reflection and concentrated thought that this requires during key times in the administrative cycle when developing school plans or setting budgets dominates their thinking. The pressures of an HMIe inspection will also be exacerbated in small schools when there may only be two teachers to observe during a four-day inspection. These issues were certainly evident amongst small school headteachers who participated in the 1996 research and were continuing issues raised by respondents in 2006.

All of the headteachers in the 2006 sample survey either were or had recently been teaching headteachers. The only exceptions were the very few (6%, 4 in 2006, 0 in 1996) who led federated or clustered schools in which they had responsibility, usually for two or more small neighbouring schools: the remainder taught either composite primary 1-3 or 4-7 classes as well as managing the school. Most of the case study headteachers had at least one day's, and some had two days', support from a relief teacher during which time they could undertake their management activities, although as a number pointed out, in practice this did not always work as planned because they could be called upon to answer the telephone, see parents or support nursery assistants. Some only had clerical support in the mornings and others reported that their management relief teachers still considered themselves to be supply staff and expected the headteacher to plan work for them to do, as well as addressing management issues. The dominant feature of the job is a sense of 'juggling' and for some this has been exacerbated by the need to reduce teachers' contact hours to comply with the Teachers' Agreement (SOED 2001). The headteacher in Case Study 6 explained how on Tuesdays

I feel I'm here, there and everywhere. I go to the nursery for 1-1.5 hours, come back to school at 12:00 for CCR [class contact reduction] time for management, teach after lunch, go back to the nursery for planning for 1.5 hours and at 3:00 return to take my own class for the last half hour.
(Headteacher, Case Study 6)

In essence, the sample headteachers were performing at least two different jobs: being a teacher and being a headteacher within the same school. It was evident that trying to balance the competing demands of each was a cause for concern. Most case study headteachers complained about the shortage of time and the growth of paperwork particularly the need to record and report activities and although this is probably felt by all headteachers, those who are also teaching clearly have less time to deal with it and fewer staff to whom they can delegate responsibilities. The headteacher in Case Study 5 said that

...you can't run a school like this on one-day management time per week. I manage to get every Thursday and alternate Friday mornings off. It is very hard work, all these initiatives... You fall between two stools. You think that you are not as good a teacher as you used to be, and not as good a manager as you want to be. (Headteacher Case Study 5)

The headteacher in Case Study 8 thought that a number of initiatives in teaching during the past 13 years had been 'cart before horse' in that the initiative was launched before teachers had been given briefings or curriculum materials developed. Again these views may also be held by headteachers in larger urban schools, but the effects are exacerbated in small schools in that if a headteacher had been out all day at meetings, their supply teachers couldn't 'just walk in to the classroom, a supply teacher can't just walk in, the amount of work has to be done before you can get out'. A number of the small schools also had a high percentage of children with additional support needs, which had not been reported in 1996. For example, Case Study 5 Headteacher attributed this to 'people looking for a family environment [in a small school] if they have a child with special needs.'

Despite these difficulties it is also clear from both the responses to the open questions on the questionnaire and from case study interviews that many small school headteachers still take a delight in teaching and would be reluctant to abandon that part of their role. Their views provide a counterbalance to the negative views expressed by others. The overwhelming majority (94%) wanted to 'create a safe and happy environment in this school' and 64% aimed to offer 'a good Scottish education'. Almost half of the respondents in 2006 agreed with the statement 'the kids keep me going.' Vision for many was rooted in what the respondents saw as the core purpose of the school, ie learning and teaching. This was expressed in a number of ways by different respondents. Headteacher 1 said that 'learning and teaching is at the heart of everything alongside learning life skills.' Another summed up her position as

...it [her priority] is always the children. It is exciting, developing their inquisitive nature, giving them opportunities to try everything out, to build on their strengths and develop in children loads of opportunities out there and also make them good citizens. It is thinking about the whole child... [I]love teaching. Some days I think I want to be out of the class and be a manager, but other days I know I don't want to be a big school head.
(Headteacher, Case Study 4)

Headteacher 5 wrote that 'it [being a small school headteacher] was the best job in the world! Keep thinking that and putting the children at the centre and all will be well!!' Another, Headteacher 6, reported that she was 'very happy teaching and still likes teaching. I like being with the children'. The importance of headteachers maintaining a teaching commitment was commented on by a class teacher who observed that her headteacher:

Is still very aware of each child as an individual rather than the school as a whole. She knows every child well. She is a manager and a teacher. She is very aware of the problems of being a teacher. She understands that if something doesn't work, it isn't because you haven't tried. (Teacher, Case Study 6)

Headteachers' attitudes towards change

The extent to which small school headteachers can lead innovations can be limited not only by their role but also by their perceptions of change. In 1996 the sample headteachers believed that the previous decade (1987-1996) had been a period of rapid curricular and management change, and that these had outstripped changes in wider society. This was a period in which four major educational initiatives: 5-14 Curriculum Guidelines; School Development Planning; Devolved School Management, and Staff Development and Appraisal had been launched in Scottish education. Ten years later, perceptions of change had changed somewhat. Fewer small school headteachers in 2006 perceived that the past ten years (1997-2006) had been a period of rapid curricular change (96% in 1996, 52% in 2006); management change (92% in 1996, 64% in 2006), and societal change (40% in 1996, 20% in 2006). However, there was still a perception that the changes that had taken place during both decades placed particular pressures on small schools (94% in 1996, 90% in 2006) precisely because they had fewer staff to whom responsibilities could be delegated and less time to manage initiatives because of their teaching commitments. Case study headteachers explained how they appreciated the support of experienced staff even if it were only one or two other trusted colleagues who could help them implement changes. One describes how she

Relied on my support staff so much; I'm really choosy about who I have in the school to do my teaching. Teachers have got to be more like me. I have a quiet manner and this leads to a quiet class and this is what I try to achieve.
(Headteacher, Case Study 3)

Others were less fortunate and one reported:

It is very easy in a small school to get out of the main stream of what is happening in education. Teachers [in this school] worked well together but were in a rut. The place was dull, children were being taught in year groups rather than ability groups, there was no flexibility, no golden time, and no positive discipline... You need more colleagues to talk with, teachers shouldn't stay too long in a small school. (Headteacher, Case Study 4)

In addition, reported levels of stress amongst responding small school headteachers was high and had improved only slightly since 1996 (66% in 1996; 59% in 2006.) A majority of respondents thought that the problem with innovation lay primarily in the pace of change (52% in 1996, 57% in 2006). However more small school headteachers in 2006 were prepared to 'consider each change on its merits' (35% in 1996, 56% in 2006) and more were enthusiastic about change, thinking it 'long overdue or simply formalising existing good practice' (11% in 1996, 30% in 2006). Despite this, the percentage who thought that it was 'change for change sake and that too much had been thrown at us already' increased from 3% in 1996 to 21% in 2006.

How can these findings be interpreted? There certainly have been numerous educational changes during the past decade that have impacted on the role of all headteachers in Scotland: classroom assistants and additional support staff have been introduced; teachers have accepted a new contract of employment that affects the terms and conditions of their work; children with additional support needs are now included in mainstream schools and pupil guidance has been reorganised. At a national level a Scottish Parliament was created, HMIE was given agency status, the Scottish Curriculum Council was rebranded as Learning and Teaching Scotland and many schools were connected electronically to the World Wide Web. The 2006 sample headteachers appear less opposed to change than the 1996 cohort. It could be that in the interim years, small school headteachers have just become better at managing change, or perhaps more likely, they do not perceive that their daily work as a teaching headteacher has been affected in the same way that the 5-14 Curriculum Guidelines fundamentally affected them and continues to create problems in terms of the depth and breadth of knowledge required of teachers of composite classes. However, that might be about to change as small schools headteachers, in common with other headteachers, appear to be on the cusp of further changes as all schools in Scotland implement a new curriculum - *A Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive 2004b). The difference is that we know from previous research that the implementation of a new curriculum can be deskilling for a headteacher, especially ones whose model of leadership is as a curriculum leader (Webb & Vulliamy 1995).

DISCUSSION

Changes over the ten years

Clearly major changes have occurred in the ten years that separate the two studies of small schools in Scotland. Devolution and a Labour and Liberal Democratic Partnership introduced a host of new educational policies, and more changes are promised in the manifesto of the Scottish National Party's new administration (SNP 2007). Both groups of small school headteachers in the two studies were trying to implement initiatives, albeit different ones. In 1996, we (Wilson & McPake 1998) argued that successful management of change required headteachers who could undertake a realistic appraisal of their current situation, develop a shared vision of the future, and plan the first few practical steps for implementation. For many of the headteachers working in small schools, this was implicitly understood. The 1996 respondents articulated a vision of the future firmly based on benefits for the children and communities which they served, and achieved this largely through their efforts as curriculum leaders. They neither

perceived themselves to be, nor referred to themselves as, educational managers but pragmatically led their schools by continuing to develop as teachers on to which they had bolted a set of specific leadership and management activities to meet the particular circumstances in which they operated. They demonstrated a contingent management style based upon their role as *teaching headteachers* with few other colleagues or resources to help them. Their main concerns at that time were the pace of change, the growth of management activities, the amount of paperwork, the lack of clerical support and the invisibility of small schools in national educational policy.

Have things changed in the intervening ten years? In fundamental ways the answer is 'No'. The main element of the job remains one of being a *teaching headteacher*, with all its attendant pleasures and difficulties so eloquently described by respondents. Most small school headteachers were still operating with a contingent style of leadership that took account of their particular situations, albeit there was more reference to consulting supportive colleagues and using clerical staff than there had been in 1996. For both groups, the discourse of management and theoretical models of leadership were irrelevant as they did not match the reality of the teaching headteacher's situation, ie 'wearing two hats' in geographical isolation. Most of the small school headteachers who participated in the 2006 research held a very similar philosophy to the one that underpinned the work of the group in 1996. Over a third (35%, 23) of the 2006 sample, were still in the posts they held in 1996, and therefore, participated in both studies. Most still enjoyed teaching and leading small schools and were clearly committed to maintaining small schools for the benefit of children and rural communities in Scotland. However, these positive aspects did not prevent respondents from recognising that many small school headteachers face serious challenges; time (or lack of it) was still perceived to be the most disabling as Case Study 4 headteacher explained – 'time just isn't there'. She also recognised that in a small school 'things were great when it works but you can imagine in a school that didn't get on, it would be very difficult.' The consensus appeared to be that when things were going well a small school headship could be one of the 'best jobs in the world' but the question remains: are small schools sustainable?

Are very small schools in danger?

During the past ten years the number of primary schools in Scotland has fallen by 5% from 2313 to 2194, and the projection of pupil numbers estimates a further decline of approximately 12% by 2016 (Scottish Government 2007). Possible closure is no longer a problem unique to small schools, despite the fact that Nicol Stephen, MSP, the then deputy Minister of Education, admitted that 94 rural schools had closed between 1995 and 2006 (Scottish Parliament 2006). This follow-up research has shown that very small schools are predominantly located in rural and island areas and the majority have stable or increasing school rolls. In 1996, 10% of small schools were in urban or mixed areas, compared to 2% in the 2006 sample. It is reasonable to assume that these were amongst the first small schools to close because in such cases it was possible for local authorities to reallocate children to other neighbouring schools, thus increasing the occupancy rate of their schools. Over half of the sample schools are classified as 'remote rural' and ironically, it is often these smallest, remote schools that are the most secure because there are no alternative schools within reasonable travelling distance. In addition, the Scottish Government's guidelines on closure that stress that an educational case must be established by local authorities before a school can close may offer them further protection.

I would argue that the most pressing problem faced by very small schools is not closure *per se*, despite the publicity proposed closures receive, but whether the role of the teaching headteacher is sustainable. In this research, reluctantly, respondents expressed concerns about the roll, which focused on the pressures of juggling, the need for additional resources, recruitment difficulties and wider societal expectations of education. Although headteachers' attitudes towards change had changed for the better since 1996, there was still a perception that the

changes had placed particular pressures on small schools (94% in 1996; 90% in 2006). In addition, the reported level of stress amongst small school headteachers was high and had improved only slightly since 1996 (66% in 1996; 59% in 2006.) Case Study 1 headteacher thought that in the future 'it will become more difficult to fill posts [in small schools], the last job advertised around here only got one application, the acting HT won't apply for it.' Another headteacher who was highly committed to small schools, reflected on the job of teaching headteacher.

Is the job sustainable? In all honesty, no. Just the way education is, just the way society is, we are teaching children to go into a very different world, we have to think out of the box. Curriculum for Excellence is making us think about it, it is the quality, the quality of teaching. We have to be in the classroom 90% of time. It is about giving them quality. I feel that I am juggling plates. A manager of a school needs to be focused on managing a school – all aspects... I sometimes think I never get off the mark with the paperwork...the pace of it is too fast. (Headteacher, Case Study 2)

To expect these hard pressed teaching headteachers to implement a new curriculum within existing time and resources may just be unrealistic.

A possible way forward?

One possible solution to the overload experienced by teaching headteachers to emerge from this research is the concept of a federated school. There is, as a study of small schools in the Netherlands (NCSL 2006) shows, no reason to assume that every school needs a headteacher, and sharing a headteacher provides not only economies of scale but more time for Dutch principals to manage their schools. However as a written response to a Parliamentary question on the 16 May 2008 shows, the term 'federated schools' is not recognised by the Scottish Government. Maureen Watt, Minister for Schools, wrote: 'there are no federated schools in Scotland. The management and deployment of staff in schools is a matter for the local authority employers to determine' (Scottish Parliament 2008b). Despite not recognizing the term, she admitted that 'the number of head teachers reported as working in two or more schools at the time of the [school] census each year was as follows: 2003 23, 2004 33, 2005 46, 2006 59, 2007 77.' An example of an existing federated school was provided by Case Study 1 in which the headteacher was responsible for two small primary schools plus a pre-school facility on a travellers' site. She was the only one of the nine case study headteachers who was non-teaching, a position she took to escape being a teaching headteacher who was 'working all hours, in the firing line and dealing with all situations.' Although formal federations of small schools were rare, some form of clustering, both formally and informally, was evident in the 1996 research, and in many cases was supported by grants from local authorities. This involved either groups of small primary schools or a secondary school and its feeder primary schools which shared resources, policies, and staff development opportunities. Headteacher 64 wrote that she had developed 'a small isle headteacher group to develop policies/for discussion. Small isles group also plan joint activities for the pupils. Both help with isolation.' By 2006, the incidence of clustering had declined somewhat, but respondents pointed to a concomitant decline in local authority financial support for it, which may account for the decline. Another headteacher explained how

I have developed and used money for a cluster group development plan, the cluster being six small schools. Unfortunately, the funding for this has ceased and each of the schools continues to support one another, when we can, but all in our own time. (Headteacher Case Study 1)

In contrast, Clarke (2002) describes three models of small school collaboration that were trialled throughout 1999 by 55 Queensland schools in Australia. These were:

- The ‘Hub Model’ that enabled small schools to contract out or outsource services from larger schools or district offices.
- The ‘Cooperative Model in which a group of small schools would share a range of functions.
- A ‘Combination Model’ an amalgamation of the Cooperative and Hub Model.

All three allowed teaching principals to concentrate more effectively on teaching and learning and facilitated their professional growth. Examples such as these were completely absent in Scotland in 1996, but by 2006 four (6%) of the very small school headteachers in the sample were in charge of federated schools, and hence had become non-teaching headteachers. This creates a structure that reduces the growing pressure on teaching headteachers. For example, the headteacher of a federated school reluctantly concluded that

...the teaching head job is not sustainable. The only reason I took this job [as a federated headteacher] was that I couldn’t sustain the level of quality in learning and teaching and management that I have given all those previous years. (Headteacher, Case Study 1)

Unfortunately, despite the estimates provided by the Minister for Schools, the precise number of federated schools in Scotland is not known as this information is not collected on the School Census or Teacher Census forms.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion one of the respondents in the 2006 research pointed out the need to ‘talk up’ small schools at a time when around a third of them feel that they are under threat from possible closure and 94 have closed. It is certainly not the intention of this article to fuel closure debate, nor to criticise the effectiveness of small school headteachers, but rather to consider objectively whether small schools really are in danger and how they might be structured in order to withstand the threat. The evidence would suggest that the threat of closure is no more than that faced by many other primary schools in urban or mixed areas given continuing demographic changes, perhaps the threat is even less than one might think as many are protected by their very remoteness and Government guidelines on closure. It is also noteworthy that the current Scottish Government has recently refused permission for the proposed closure of two very small schools – a 4-pupil school in Dumfries and Galloway and an 8-pupil school in Stirling¹. However, a separate question emerges: can small schools survive in their existing form? The evidence on this is far more equivocal. The post of teaching headteacher is under increasing pressure because of the complexity of curriculum, management and leadership activities and occupational stress. By any standards the current role of *teaching headteacher* is a complex one. Small school headteachers need to demonstrate a high level of expertise in teaching multi-age and –stage classes while at the same time providing effective whole school leadership, usually by operating with a contingent leadership style. Successful leaders of small schools require an ability ‘to juggle’ a wide range of competing priorities, with few colleagues or resources, and are also being asked to implement a new curriculum. Current incumbents are also an ageing group, as is the teaching profession, and they have learnt their skills largely by teaching in small schools. Many already feel marginalised in an educational policy making system that is remote from the rural areas and which they perceive ignores the particular needs of small schools. The message from this research is that small schools’ headteachers need adequate support if they are to maintain the role effectively for the benefit of the children who live in some of Scotland’s more remote communities. Federated schools may be one way forward, but further research is required.

EPILOGUE

Since this research was completed, interest in school closure in Scotland has increased. First, Murdo Fraser, MSP, drafted a private members’ bill to safeguard rural schools on 21 January 2008 (Scottish Parliament, 2008a). Before the consultation period was over

in April 2008, Fiona Hyslop, MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Education in Scotland, announced her commitment to safeguarding rural schools and the Scottish Government's own bill is currently out for consultation (The Scottish Government, 2008). If this bill is passed, it will establish a presumption against closure, currently enjoyed by rural schools in England. The consultation period ends on 19 September 2008.

ENDNOTE

¹ Reported on 29 June 2007 by BBC Scotland

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