

SMALL SCHOOLS MEETING THE CHALLENGE: AN INVESTIGATIVE SURVEY OF SMALL SCHOOLS IN COUNTY DURHAM

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ABSTRACT

This survey emerged from concerns raised by Headteachers in 1998 when schools in England and Wales were introducing the National Literacy Strategy. Headteachers were concerned that they would be unable to respond to the national initiative and effectively deliver what was, in their view, a curriculum framework designed for larger schools with single age classes. At the same time some in local government questioned the effectiveness of small schools. Concerns centred on whether small schools could adequately deliver the national curriculum, improve pupils' attainment in line with Local Education Authority (LEA) targets and, because of their high unit cost, provide good value for money. This survey was set up to look at the effectiveness of small schools in County Durham. It focuses on the Headteacher who because of his/her unique role, is an essential contributor to school improvement projects. The findings have been used to inform the debate on the overall effectiveness of small schools in the County and have subsequently led to the LEA working with the National College for School Leadership to develop ways of supporting Headteachers in small schools.

BACKGROUND

Small schools are defined by Keast (1991), Waugh (1991) and Galton (1993) as those with less than 100 because "it has been long recognised that schools of this size have their own set of specific organisational, pedagogical and managerial challenges that may warrant different approaches to those taken by larger schools" Galton (1993). Within this definition a further distinction was made by the researchers between those two teacher schools where the pupil roll was between 30 and 60 and the headteacher had a significant teaching commitment for 80% of the week, and three or four teacher schools where the headteacher often taught less.

In January 1998, 34 primary schools in County Durham with less than 100 pupils had been inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). These schools are situated mainly in rural and semi-rural areas of the county and account for 10.07% of the Local Education Authority's primary school population. The findings are based upon an investigative trawl of research literature, interviews with Headteachers in a sample of 22 schools representative of the different rural and urban areas in County Durham, a scrutiny of reports on the sample schools from OFSTED and an analysis of performance data for their 11 year old pupils.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

In the past, small schools have been too easily written off by their critics but there is little evidence of differences in the quality of education being offered by schools of different sizes (Galton and Patrick, 1990). A number of reports from Hadow (1931) to Better Schools (1985) and Rationalising Primary School Provision (Audit Commission, 1990) have been critical of the cost effectiveness of small schools yet there is no consistent and reliable evidence available to substantiate such arguments. (Galton and Patrick, 1990) Indeed, Bell and Sigsworth (1987) reported that HMI could find no association between school size and the quality of the school's educational programme and more recent reports from OfSTED appear to support this view.

Hayes (1996) and Dunning (1993) describe in detail the role of teaching Headteachers and their success in managing change. Wilson and McPake (1999) affirmed the view that Headteachers of small schools are not resistant to change as such, but to the timescales in which they are asked to respond. They take the view that the success of many small schools bears testament to the hard work and commitment of Headteachers, to their staff, pupils, parents and governors.

Hargreaves, *et al.* (1996) produced a comprehensive assessment of teachers' confidence and competence to teach the national curriculum. Their research concluded that the pessimism about the quality of education provision in small schools was unjustified. To the contrary, there was evidence that pupils' performance in standardised tests for reading and mathematics was at least as good and often better than that of pupils in larger schools. They found that teachers in smaller schools where they taught classes which contained pupils of different ages, adapted to and implemented change quickly and were therefore generally as confident, if not more so, to teach the national curriculum than their colleagues in larger schools.

Most classes in small schools accommodate at least two age groups and in the smallest schools, a whole Key Stage, children aged 7-11 years of age¹. The need for differing teaching approaches in such schools was recognised as early as 1931 in the Hadow report but it was not until the work of Hargreaves *et al.* (1996) and Williams and Thorpe (1997) that we were provided with a greater insight into how teachers in small schools adapt their pedagogical approaches to cater for pupils of mixed age and ability in one class. These studies acknowledged that teachers in small schools develop a particular set of competencies but that teacher development is sometimes restricted because opportunities to work closely with colleagues and to access facilities for professional development are less readily available to teachers working in rural areas.

The introduction in England and Wales of a National Curriculum in 1988 and a national system of school inspection by OfSTED in 1994, have raised concerns by government officials about the capacity of small schools to deliver an effective and appropriately balanced curriculum. Researchers have generally set such concerns aside. Hargreaves, *et al.* (1996) reported that teachers seem to have altered their curriculum and team strategies to comply with pressures exerted by OfSTED, but they appear not to have changed their preferred teaching tactics. In their study, many teachers were seen to be reluctant to abandon their role as facilitators and to engage in more of the whole class challenging interactions featured in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. In 1995, Vulliamy and Webb identified positive advantages for curriculum provision in small schools due, in no small measure to the influence upon the curriculum from Headteachers who spend a large proportion of their time in the classroom. The impact of the Headteacher on the teaching process was not missed by Francis (1992) who reported that those 11 year olds attending schools of 60 or fewer pupils were found to be significantly more positive in their attitudes to learning than those attending larger schools.

Research to date seems overwhelmingly to present a view that small schools are generally effective in what they do and that Headteachers make a very important contribution to their success. However, in a critique of the existing research into small primary schools, Phillips (1997) claims that much of the research is flawed because there is no agreed definition of a small school and research methodology, which is usually based on Headteacher and teacher interviews, is biased in their favour. She is critical of the analysis of the data used in the ORACLE and PRISM research projects used to make an overall judgement on the standards achieved in small schools. She recommends reference to OfSTED's data base to support future research into small schools because of the need to overcome the greatest flaw in making judgements about the effectiveness of small schools; the lack of first hand data on classroom practice, particularly in vertically grouped classes.

METHODOLOGY

Acting upon the recommendations of Phillips (1997), this survey is based upon a scrutiny of reports from OfSTED, an analysis of performance data at Key Stage 2 and interviews with Headteachers. Our decision to adopt a conversational methodology (Beard, 1989) or semi-structured interview with Head teachers was to give them the opportunity to address a range of issues which they considered impacted upon the quality of leadership, management, teaching and learning in their schools. The limitations of this approach as described by Denicolo and Pope (1990; Atkins, 1984) are fully recognised but, as Atkins agrees, the information yielded from such semi-structured research techniques is not only “rich and interesting” it helps “get beyond form and structure” (Atkins, 1984).

The investigation began with visits to 22 schools. Each visit included a tour of the school, an examination of curriculum planning and an interview with the Headteacher. Though we acknowledged that such interviews are frequently reliant on anecdotal evidence, we nevertheless found that they were a rich source of information. Every attempt was taken to avoid interviewer bias by basing discussions upon a range of issues that had emerged at Headteacher Conferences in 1998 and those most commonly reported in published research. Transcripts were analysed to separate issues specific to individual schools from those that occurred more frequently. To form a view on the academic standards achieved in small schools, their comparative performance in National Tests (SATs) was scrutinised. Recognising the unreliability of attaching too much significance to the results achieved in very small cohorts, the results of all 22 schools (1998) were collated into one cohort of 227 pupils and compared with Local Education Authority (LEA) and National averages. Finally, issues that had emerged from interviews and data from national tests were compared with the judgements made by OfSTED in their inspection of small schools in County Durham between 1995–1998 and the characteristics of effective schools outlined by Reynolds (1997).

ARE SMALL SCHOOLS IN COUNTY DURHAM EFFECTIVE? THE HEAD TEACHER'S DUAL ROLE

Leadership and Management

The frustrations that emerge when managing a small school were forcefully made during interviews with the Headteachers in our sample and most reflect the findings reported by Wilson and McPake (1999). Many of the 22 Head teachers interviewed in our study reported inadequate preparation and training to help them resolve the conflicting demands on their time that teaching and managing a school brings. It is clear from the interviews that pressure to resolve such conflict can quickly become burdensome. For example, Head teachers felt obliged to make a considerable personal investment in their job by devoting long hours to support staff, parents and governors in addition to time for new management commitments that have arisen from the national drive for school improvement. All Head teachers reported that their first priority was to their class. Tension between their teaching role and responsibilities for leadership and management arose because of limited time to devote exclusively to the management of the school; less time to construct long term strategic plans; to monitor, evaluate and reflect on whole school issues and a wider educational context. Given this tension between a commitment to teaching and responsibility to management, often combined with a lack of clerical support, Head teachers seek ways in which to *slipstream* (Hayes, 1996) their management and administrative procedures. The need to seek ‘short-cuts’ is aptly summed up by one Head teacher:

“Faced with a full in-tray at the end of a busy teaching day, the only thing that I can be certain of is that tomorrow there will be more. Managing my time and trying to find short cuts so that the job can be done, present the greatest

challenge of small school headship and makes the biggest contribution to the overload which many Heads experience.”

A recently appointed Headteacher eager to bring about change commented,

“My progress is not proportionate to my efforts and the considerable activities in which the staff are involved. I often feel frustrated by the amount of time I have to spend in the classroom and at the limitations having few staff places upon developing initiatives”.

The implementation of the National Literacy Strategy was a genuine concern to Headteachers in the sample. With fewer opportunities to provide teachers with the variety of experiences available in larger schools, one Headteacher reported that he had become aware of curriculum stagnation, commenting that some well established staff had fallen under an “*anaesthetic of familiarity, unable to see a different way to do things*”. Bringing about change in such circumstances was a challenge further complicated where he had to take on additional curriculum responsibilities, limit and prioritise developments whilst attempting to find time to personally maintain or monitor others. He found that opportunities for development were sometimes missed or staff found themselves only skimming the surface of the new curriculum guidance. However, on a more positive note, more than half of the Headteachers reported that the active participation in planning and decision making on the part of teachers combined with their own involvement at the classroom level, played an important part in motivating everyone in the school to review their practice in teaching Literacy and move the school forward.

To manage limited financial resources more effectively and for the purpose of implementing initiatives, accessing funding and sharing expertise, schools across the local authority are formed into clusters. In the best examples, staff from partner cluster schools meet regularly to plan topics around shared resources and often come together for in-service training. In response to the national drive for school improvement, school-based in-service has developed widely in County Durham because it enables Head teachers to direct training towards meeting the school’s aims. Most schools work closely with curriculum consultants or staff from other schools to prepare policies and guidance to help them adapt new initiatives to the small school context.

Teaching

Over time, pupils remaining with their teachers for several years has become central to the culture of the small school and the tradition of mixed age classes has become accepted by teachers, parents and pupils. Descriptions of lessons observed by OFSTED and LEA inspectors give a clear picture of specialists at work, delivering good and very good lessons. All teaching Headteachers had a good understanding of the National Curriculum, the technical skills to deliver it and the ability to manage complex learning situations that emerge in large mixed-age classes. The differentiation of activities to match pupils’ prior attainment was evident in all of the best lessons. Headteachers planned with their staff to ensure that the curriculum was broad, balanced and most importantly, developmentally appropriate. Planning can be difficult for some schools given fluctuating pupil numbers. This is particularly so where new pupils arrive mid-year and alter the age profile of the class. The challenge for the Headteacher is to adapt the organisation of activities and grouping of pupils to meet their needs. As one Headteacher explained,

“we do our best and teachers work well together to provide detailed medium term plans to try and ensure that there is not too much repetition for each age group even where this might be one or two pupils”.

FINDINGS FROM OFSTED: QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN THE SMALL SCHOOLS

The Key Issues for action to improve the quality of education and raise attainment and that appeared in 15% or more reports, are summarised in Table 1. In total, Ofsted raised 107 key issues in the 22 schools.

Table 1: Examples of key issues raised in Ofsted inspection in small schools in County Durham. Number of schools in survey = 22

Nos. of Schools	Key issue	Main concern raised in the report
7	Raise standards and improve progress in English	Handwriting
5	Raise standards and progress in information technology	Replace outdated equipment
4	Raise expectations for more able pupils	Provide more challenge
6	Ensure a good match of work to ability	Plan and organise activities
7	Improve medium term planning	Subject guidance and schemes of work
4	Improve continuity and progression	Avoid duplication and eliminate gaps in medium term plans
4	Improve or develop systems to monitor work of the school	Teaching, the curriculum and assessment
4	Review or clarify roles	Subject co-ordinators and middle managers

The main findings suggest that small schools do not have the capacity to effectively differentiate the curriculum in all subjects. This was particularly the case in Information Technology lessons where gaps in teacher's subject knowledge were evident in schemes of work, lesson plans and use of resources. Pupils' progress was further hindered by limited access to out dated technology.

To look more deeply into the effectiveness of the schools in the sample, judgements from the inspection reports were compared with the characteristics for school effectiveness reported by Reynolds (1997). The results presented in Table 2 show that the strengths identified from this analysis support a view that despite their size, small schools are effective in many ways.

Table 2: A summary of Ofsted findings when considered alongside characteristics of school effectiveness

Indicator of school effectiveness (Ofsted Framework)	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Academic standards	6	8	8	0
School ethos	14	4	4	0
Quality of education	6	12	4	0
Efficiency (incl. value for money)	6	14	2	0
Total number of schools = 22				

In 14 of the 22 schools inspected, standards were judged to be good or better and in none of the sample were standards considered unsatisfactory overall. As expected there is a wide variation from school to school with a low of 2 of 9 pupils achieving Level 4+ in English (National Standard) in one school, to a maximum of 11 from 12 in another. A similar variation is evident in mathematics and science. Nevertheless, when treated as a single cohort, it is clear that the standards achieved by pupils in the group of 'small schools' are in line with the average levels of attainment in the Local Authority for English and Science though there was a marked difference in Mathematics (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of standards achieved in small schools (key stage 2 SATs) with LEA and National averages (1998).

	English % at level 4+	Mathematics % at level 4+	Science % at level 4+
22 Small schools (227 pupils)	62% (141 pupils)	51% (116 pupils)	74% (168 pupils)
LEA	63%	62%	74%
National	65%	59%	69%

(The differences in the number of pupils taking the tests in English, Mathematics and Science is due to absenteeism on the date of the test. The national expectation is that pupils achieve Level 4 by the age of 11 years.)

The qualities of small schools began to emerge when the characteristics of school effectiveness (Reynolds, 1997) were used to interpret the findings in the Ofsted reports. For example, there were positive statements regarding the professional leadership of the Headteacher; strong teamwork and a positive climate for learning. The schools were found to have well articulated aims and shared values that underpin all aspects of school life. In the majority of cases, curriculum and lesson planning promoted progression and continuity. Conditions for learning were described as good with well established classroom routines promoting effective learning and good behaviour. In all schools it was recognised that staff work hard and are very caring and supportive of pupils. High expectations were realised by high quality teaching and learning.

Reports confirmed the long held view that the ethos of small schools is traditionally what has set them apart in many ways from their larger neighbours. Small schools present greater social cohesiveness and better opportunities to develop more positive relationships than many large schools. It is clear that when factors such as the quality of teaching, the quality of the curriculum and, provision for pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development are combined, small schools provide a good quality of education for their pupils.

In summary, reports confirmed our views from Head teachers' interviews that the majority of schools have:

- Well articulated aims and shared values.
- Good discipline and behaviour.
- Curriculum planning which promotes progression and continuity.
- Lesson planning which clearly identifies learning objectives and appropriate content.
- Assessment that is planned and used to inform future planning.
- A management style which is inclusive. Where all are involved and are willing and keen to contribute their individual strengths to a common purpose
- Staff who are very caring and supportive of pupils; who work hard and know their pupils well.
- Classroom routines that are well established to promote effective learning and good behaviour.
- Good display to enhance the learning environment.

Efficiency and Value for money

Over many years the most consistent arguments presented for closing small schools were based upon economics from a perception of ineffectiveness and poor value for money. Today when judging the effectiveness of a school, Ofsted takes into account the characteristics of the school, for example, the background of its pupils together with the quality of teaching and leadership that contribute to the educational standards. The value for money provided by the school is a composite assessment of its effectiveness and efficiency in relation to its success. In all schools with under 100 pupils, the unit costs are relatively high and there are few opportunities to implement economies of scale. Nevertheless, the survey of Ofsted reports revealed that all small schools in County Durham were judged to be efficiently managed and give at least satisfactory value for money.

DISCUSSION

The introduction in the 1990s of national testing for 7 and 11 year olds meant that for the first time comparative data was available for schools of different sizes and background. In County Durham, standards in English and Mathematics in 1998 were not significantly different to those nationally but there has been significant variation from year to year. There appears to be a more complex picture underlying the general statistic of pupils attaining level 4 in national tests. For example, where eligibility for free school meals is low (less than 10%), larger schools achieved significantly higher levels of attainment than the very small schools even when cohort size was compensated for. Moreover, when comparisons were made with schools in similar socio-economic circumstance, the results showed that very small schools are performing less well than at first appeared. When value added measures were taken into account, reports indicated that while pupils in small and very small schools are less likely to make unsatisfactory

progress, those in two teacher schools are less likely to make very good progress. It seems likely then, that the national debate over pupils' achievement in small schools may continue to fuel speculation on their overall effectiveness.

Good management and good teaching are the two most significant characteristics of successful schools that are uniquely combined in the role of the small school Headteacher. However, our interview data revealed that training and support for these Headteachers is seldom forthcoming as few, if any, of management and leadership courses deal sufficiently with the complexities of the dual role. Traditional management theories, especially those pertaining to management teams were perceived to be unhelpful. Headteachers voiced their frustrations that as the only manager in the school, their responsibilities increased as the size of the school reduced alongside the time in which to perform them. The inadequate training and preparation for headship was made by one Headteacher who said,

“Having been the deputy-headteacher of a large junior school, I considered this post would be a less threatening venture into headship. I thought that small schools had small problems. However, any assumption that working in a small school would be easy, was very quickly changed as the responsibilities for my class and for the whole school assumed new proportions”.

With limited time to devote exclusively to the management of the school and with an increasingly complex array of decisions to be made, most Headteachers quickly develop a unique blend of experience and idiosyncratic techniques to make efficient use of the few staff available to them. Such leadership and management techniques are recognised by OfSTED as strengths in the leadership and management of small schools, not least because of the complex and demanding domain of managing change and motivating staff.

Headteachers see many dimensions to their teaching role but all see it as an excellent opportunity to develop effective relationships with pupils and their parents, and as a means of improving their schools from the classroom outwards. The benefits that schools derive from the Headteacher's involvement in teaching that were reported by Vulliamy and Webb (1995) seem to be substantiated in both interviews with Headteachers and OfSTED reports. However, such involvement is not without its costs and the introduction of the national frameworks for literacy and numeracy have raised even further the expectations that Headteachers, particularly in the smallest schools, demonstrate a high level of technical skill. The encouragement to develop wider use of whole class teaching brings into question whether Headteachers can continue to foster the effective facilitator role that Galton et al (1996) described. There is growing pressure on teachers to take a more proactive role in pupils learning, to direct and guide rather than facilitate and there is growing evidence from OfSTED that this remains an area for development in small schools. Headteachers commented on the developing trend of whole class teaching describing how teachers are beginning to customise teaching techniques and lesson management to take account of pupils' ages, learning styles and levels of attainment.

All small schools in the sample worked to overcome the limitations imposed upon them by their size by forming clusters so that expertise and to some extent finance could be shared. The Local Government Association supports the formation of clusters but their effectiveness in achieving their objectives has been questioned by many Headteachers in County Durham. The strategic management and resourcing of very small schools are issues for some of our neighbouring Local Authorities. The experience of Headteachers in County Durham is that clustering arrangements are ineffective where they represent too diverse a group or where some schools in the cluster are geographically isolated from the rest. The importance of key persons to co-ordinate the work of the cluster arose in a number of interviews with Head teachers and this is best summed up by one who commented,

“Managing the cluster is critical to its success. A cluster group will not manage itself. Very small schools often share the same problems but energy for solving them collectively often dissipates as we focus inwardly on the management of our own school. Opportunities to solve problems collectively are sometimes missed because small schools do not have the resources or staffing flexibility available in larger schools.”

CONCLUSION

We have identified some of the challenges facing small and very small schools in County Durham, most importantly the demands placed upon Headteachers. The effectiveness with which most Headteachers discharge their duties and responsibilities is confirmed in the findings from external evaluation. This survey indicates that small schools are effective in many ways and that the role of the Head teacher in leading school improvement is paramount. The effectiveness of their work is illustrated by pupils' attainment in national tests. The relationship between the constraints placed upon leadership, management and teaching in small schools with similar backgrounds and the standards of pupil achievement, however, warrants further investigation. An effective way forward to ensure that where improvement is necessary, it is based upon a clear understanding of the problem and draws upon the experiences of significant others, may well flow from research projects by Local Education Authorities that are now rich in data and information on their schools.

NOTES

1. The National Curriculum for England and Wales is organised into Key Stages covering the years of compulsory education: KS1, age 5-7, years 1 and 2; KS2, age 7-11, years 3-6; KS3, age 11-14, years 7-9; KS4, age 14-16, years 10 and 11.

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