

SMALL RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE UK

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There are small rural primary schools in the United Kingdom - that is to say schools with as few as twenty pupils and with as many as a hundred pupils where the principal has a fairly full teaching commitment. Many of these small primary schools are in the "shire" countries - the South-West and Northern Ireland. In the South-West about a third of the primary (5-11) schools have less than 100 pupils on roll. The distance to an alternative school may be as little as three miles: it is unlikely that the distance (by road) will be greater than twenty miles.

The Education Reform Act

The schools in England and Wales are bound by the same London-based central controls with local authority implementation. For those schools in England and Wales recent legislation looks to have assisted the Government in its war of attrition against the small primaries. The 1988 Education Reform Act not only set out the framework for the National Curriculum with national assessment procedures but it also introduced a new basis for funding schools along with a devolved management system.

The National Curriculum and the assessment procedures have been difficult for all primary schools to handle. Research shows that neither size of school nor its location is likely to be a factor in determining the success of these innovations at school level. There are good and less good teachers in schools regardless of size. Moreover, what has been a problem for large schools has sometimes been routine for a small school and vice versa.

Formula Funding

The major headache for small primary schools has come with the implementation (and extension) of that part of the Education Reform Act which requires schools to be funded on similar bases. The concept of formula funding sets out to bring parity of funding in that each local authority's formula must be based on the number of pupils on roll - simply, the bigger the school, the higher the level of funding. While the merit of such a scheme may well be in its parity, the notion of equity seems to be overlooked. As ever, small schools cost more than big schools and in the UK there is not agreement as to whether or not the additional cost of small schools should be tolerated.

The national requirements for formula funding make it virtually impossible for local authorities to build in much by way of protection for the increase in costs which inevitably come with the decrease in size of schools. In the few years since the introduction of formula funding a degree of protection has been permitted. Recent (April 1991) amendments to the Act will bring about reductions in funding for schools beyond their roll number entitlement.

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The Exeter Surveys

The Exeter Small Schools Network has been monitoring the impact of the Education Reform Act on small rural primary schools. Data has been obtained by questionnaires and from delegates attending the Exeter Annual National Conference. The 1992 Survey has responses from over 100 Headteachers from 33 Local Education Authorities.

To a large extent the condition and prospects of the individual school is in the hands of the local authority (often a "shire" county like Devonshire) and the stance that authority takes towards its small schools. Previously with locally autonomous funding policies local authorities are "reviewing" their schools and looking particularly at the viability and "cost effectiveness" of their smallest schools.

The 1992 Survey has revealed huge differences in the quality and quantity of support by local authorities. Supportive authorities make special provision for their small schools by funding initiatives, appointing personnel with special responsibility for small schools and having a visible system of policy making. Some authorities make the most of the controls on the formula and create additional funding for the small schools.

Each schools' financial allocation, based on the formula, has to cover all costs including a school's greatest expenditure item - the teachers' salaries. One of the problems that arises is that older teachers are more expensive than younger teachers and part-timers are cheaper than full-timers.

There has been another development which has added enormously to the burden of the principals of these schools. It has been decided that all principals must take on full responsibility for the financial management of their schools. Most headteachers, (or principals) have a heavy teaching commitment. In the Exeter survey all but 4% of the heads had responsibility for a class. While the scope of "Local Management of Schools" is attractive the administrative burden is literally creating stress.

Nevertheless, 60% of the headteachers in the 1992 Survey say that their schools are better off since the introduction of formula funding and local management.

The 1992 Exeter Survey found that over 90% of the small schools are working co-operatively with one or more schools. The term "clustering" is the favourite descriptor for a range of activities. These activities include INSET, curriculum development, joint sporting and cultural activities.

The paradox of the growth of clustering is that the development has occurred at a time when competition between schools has been assumed to be the natural consequence of formula funding and the local management of schools. Small schools in rural areas are co-operating and declaring a group identity and strength. The competition is often between the cluster and the nearest fee-paying school.

Politics ...

Education generally and, perhaps, primary education specifically, is a target for the Government; some would say that this is so to provide a distraction from problems within other sectors, notably the health service! Almost weekly (it seems more often!) there is a new attack and a new subsequent dictate for a new strategy. Recently there has been an attack on the feasibility of the class-teacher model whereby one teacher takes a class for

most subjects. The suggestion is that there should be more subject specialist teaching in primary schools, particularly for the ten and eleven year olds.

Although this proposal is anathema to most child-centred ideologues there may be some merit in it. First thoughts are that the proposal is yet another challenge for small schools with a teaching staff of two, three or four teachers. Little chance of specialist teaching in a two-teacher school! The way forward can only be through a development of the trust being built up among teachers who are members of a cluster of schools. Already the Exeter Survey has identified clusters where expertise has been identified and used by all member schools.

In the UK, then, the major challenges for small primary schools are in demonstrating that they can deliver that which is expected of them, in securing equitable funding and for the principals, balancing their teaching and managerial responsibilities.

There is also the challenge of countering the obsession with calculating the cost of small schools with the neglected qualitative statements articulating the value of these schools. We are in danger of knowing the cost and failing to declare the value of small schools.