

FOUR CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE VIABILITY OF SMALL RURAL SCHOOL IN NEW ZEALAND

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New Zealand rural education since 1991 has been influenced by the publication of the *Report of the Economic and Educational Viability of Small Schools Review* which, while not devoted entirely to the rural sector of the country's education system, was in large part concerned with the educational viability of small schools in isolated communities. In New Zealand, most small schools are in rural areas, although there are some notable urban exceptions. The review took place amid considerable media speculation and growing apprehension about the future of small schools, particularly those in remote parts of the country.

Four aspects of small schools were considered: their educational and economic viability, relationships with communities and a number of "associated issues", particularly the conflict between availability and choice.

The "educational viability" of a small school, as with any school, is difficult to establish. The report defined a small school as educationally viable "if pupils in it are taught an appropriate curriculum to a reasonable standard in an environment which enhances achievement and social development." An appropriate curriculum was "one which follows the official syllabuses and associated guidelines developed by the Department of Education before 1 October 1989 and the Ministry of Education since 1 October 1989". Of particular importance were the range of subject areas available to their urban counterparts despite the availability of distance education.

Related to this issue is the matter of the professional development of teachers in rural school, and the report team noted that "isolation in itself does not mean that teachers in small rural schools are less capable of delivery the curriculum". While there was recognition that many rural teachers went to considerable lengths to remain up to date by attending courses, the role that distance education could play in this aspect of small rural schools in New Zealand was not fully discussed or explored by the authors of this report.

It was further noted that there is no New Zealand research on the relationship between school size and educational effectiveness and so overseas material was examined (Wilson and Corcoran, 1988; Creemers, Peters and Reynolds, 1989). The authors noted that "it has yet to be demonstrated that pupil achievement suffers because of the size of a school" in spite of the acknowledgment that it is often thought that rural pupils "tend to achieve at a lower level than their urban counterparts". This apparent contradiction is a matter that requires research. The popular belief that smallness in itself may seem an undesirable characteristic in a school is acknowledged, but the authors point to research that suggests such an idea is unfounded in relation to small rural schools overseas (Bell and Sigsworth, 1987).

Difficulty was experienced deciding what was meant by educational effectiveness in relation to small schools. The review team decided that lack of New Zealand research made it impossible to reach a conclusion on this matter.

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The **economic viability** of small schools, it was argued, depended on the level of resources that a government was prepared to use to "purchase educational services from schools". In determining the economic viability of small schools, the report noted that there are no published reports addressing the issue of whether economies of scale exist in New Zealand schools, but that "it is assumed in the funding formula for operational grants that economies of scale do exist." It was pointed out however, that:

"Population density in large part influences the size of schools; consequently, accepting that a school is required in an area of low population density usually means that the costs involved will be higher than in a more densely populated area" (Report, p25).

Salaries are the major cost component of any school, typically comprising between 65% and 80% of all money spent in a year. Staffing schedules are therefore particularly significant as a unit of school costs in small schools. The review team considered two other items to be particularly significant, however, in the case of small schools: transport and property. It was pointed out that the economic viability of small schools had to be considered in relation to the alternative of transporting pupils to other centres of educating them through the Correspondence School which is located in the capital, Wellington. The issue of pupil transport is complex and is influenced by a range of factors and the authors of the report found it impossible to generalise on this matter.

Where a small school has a falling roll, the issue of property maintenance has to be looked at closely with a view to considering whether or not there is sufficient utilisation of a public asset to justify its continued existence.

The report considered the **relationships small schools have traditionally had with their communities** and noted that closure of a school threatened the well being and even the continued existence of some small communities as demonstrated by Scottish research which suggests "almost a fifth of the gross current expenditure on a rural school makes a contribution to the community surrounding the school" (Bell and Sigsworth, op cit).

A major issue to emerge from the Review in addition to its consideration of educational, economic and community matters, was **conflict between availability and choice**. Choice in rural communities was considered to be a "special case" which could be constrained by location and family resources. It would be useful to know more about the nature and extent of this aspect of rural education in New Zealand, particularly with the development of new communication technologies that are becoming available throughout the country and which have applications through the Correspondence School. Disappointingly, this matter was not adequately explored in the report.

Where a small school was considered to be "non-viable", a variety of "alternative possibilities" were outlined: amalgamation (or merging) with another institution, consolidation with other schools, closure, relocation of the school to another site, use of the Correspondence School and increasing transport and boarding assistance to enable pupils to attend schools in other communities.

The report was supportive of small schools in New Zealand in most of its recommendations but did not fully consider the possibilities of new communication technologies for extending education in rural communities. This seems to be an obvious aspect of rural New Zealand education for further investigation.

It has been argued (Stevens, 1991) that underlying the report is a suggestion that small schools may not be viable in economic and educational terms. A problem for New Zealand rural educators is that small rural schools really have to be differentiated from small schools located in urban areas to a greater extent than has been the case in this report. It is difficult to visualise any community being other than angry at the closure of its school, but in rural areas schools have particular social and cultural as well as educational significance. While this is acknowledged by the review team, its consideration of small schools in rural areas along with small schools in other types of communities creates potential difficulties for the continued well being of rural New Zealanders. By setting out criteria for the closure of small schools on the grounds of their educational and economic viability, a vital aspect of rural New Zealand life is threatened (Stevens, *ibid*). In rural communities schools are more than educational institutions; they have so many functions that it is not possible to consider their economic and educational functions apart from their other roles in community life. In a country like New Zealand, with an economy based to a large extent on primary production, the justification for such a threat is difficult to comprehend. Any proposal that small rural schools may be educationally non-viable suggests lack of understanding of the nature of New Zealand society and its economy. New Zealand society and its economic life are both influenced by rural communities and therefore by the education that is provided within them.

References

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