

Small Schools

The Perfect Antidote to Toxic Childhood.

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I very much enjoyed the conference in December discussing issues of modern childhood. NASS shares the view that the nature of that experience has been changing, and in particular ways very alarming.

We were founded to defend small schools from closure and promote their virtues. We have done this on the whole effectively and have a considerable dossier of now almost incontrovertible evidence of those virtues embracing academic, social, community and even financial effectiveness. It is time to dispel the myths, not least since currently 2008 has opened with a significant new round of local authority pressure to close village schools.

Our argument, however, is not simply about village schools and rural areas. We believe the model of effective education now reflected in best village school practice displays more the qualities of small, human-scale education close to home and family, and within identifiable local communities, that all our children need, in town and country alike.

Within such a model children feel safe and secure, know everyone and are known by everyone, behave well, feel that effort is worthwhile and achievement possible. Our data confirms the better overall results that small schools achieve collectively. We believe this is as obtainable in the inner city as in remote Scottish communities where currently some of the best evidence arises not only of academic achievement in small schools but also achievement by pupils from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

We now argue that in urban new-build situations we should never again provide the standard 300+ primary school but smaller units serving streets rather than entire estates, with public areas close by that schools could readily use. These units would lend themselves to unitary management in the way Councils now try to force on scattered villages in the name of federation. Urban federations within a concept of an urban village make far more sense.

In our media contacts during the recent crisis we have made much of the fact that there is growing concern about childhood and we have used the phrase "*toxic childhood*" as a description we say is growing in currency. We have argued small schools a particularly wholesome model of education that is a perfect antidote to toxic childhood.

Research consistently shows educational outcomes still strongly reflect home background. It can be up to 50% and remains a lottery, for better or worse. The other 50% invariably reflects quality of teaching, also a lottery, as OFSTED knows of course but no longer assesses in the way that enabled it to report in 1999 that the quality of teaching was *better in small schools with proportionately more good teachers.*

At the Exeter Conference we heard from James York-Moore about the way a school supports children and families. He led a superb small school within which all these wholesome factors well came together. However, apart from the discussion group that had me to mention the role of small schools, there was not a lot of open discussion about the contribution of schooling to resolving our concerns for children and their development.

We have often been regarded as an organisation focused on the countryside. As explained above we are not so exclusively focused. Yet one can read the glossy brochures and publications of Rural Community Councils, the Commission for the Countryside, CPRE and wonder if schools actually exist in villages. They are rarely if ever mentioned. At a recent annual ACRE conference one seminar included an ACRE presentation including a stereotypical map of a sample village showing pub, church, village green, houses and streets, even a post-office but no school. Sadly that is the situation now in more than half our villages but need we embed it in that way? Schools are central to almost every other rural issue, jobs, housing, services, shops, transport the environment but their worth ignored, the subject hived off to local authority disposition. I hope in our future activities we can retain the school at the centre of our efforts to resolve the problems we see for children.

NASS is the only organisation actively endorsing and evidencing the worth of small schools, wherever, and defending them.. We are just a handful of volunteers, no permanent paid staff or offices, little money, dependent on subscription income from other believers like ourselves. Yet we have the model of education that can truly transform society, overturning a centuries-old pattern with which we have foolishly persisted for far too long despite its very evident educational and social failings.

It has been just too top-heavy, too large scale, too packaged, too conforming to a narrow model of success which even at university level research has shown too often to correlate with speed of handwriting and efficiency of memory.

In small schools children start with a close and effective relationship with between parents and teachers, the people they most love, pulling them in the same direction, on the same wavelengths, sharing values and ambitions. The positive learning factors mentioned earlier clearly drive the very evident success in tests and inspections achieved by small schools and of which the Scottish Executive data gives only the latest proof.

Children in their smallest schools have a 25% higher chance of reaching university and, crucially, children in such schools from impoverished and disadvantaged backgrounds actually make progress where their counterparts in our big urban concentrations have remained a cadre of under-achievement and disaffection, often extremely expensive, since first identified 30 years ago in *"All our Futures"*. Still the nation regularly hears it is failing its poorer children. Still The Independent can report that within university performance the negative impact of income gap shows.

Those who would close small schools regard them as too expensive but dress their arguments in educational reasons. How can just two or three teachers do what is necessary? How can those children learn in mixed age groups and mixed ability groups, and with so few others of like ability?

Yet OFSTED report after OFSTED report glows with the evidence of how well these children are served. There is no evidence that those alleged disadvantages are anything but assets in good professional hands. For they extend naturally the very effective model of learning to which children are attuned from birth and to which they return every day. It is the model found after school in the world of work. School, especially the 90% that is not small, human scale reflecting real life, is almost alien and that is first and foremost the reason it continues to fail the majority of our children.

Small schools use the different abilities, experience and maturity of their children. Research backs those more flexible, pupil-aware models. Young and old effectively learn together. Good teaching and planning steer this process towards purposeful education goals but within the process children take responsibility, make many of their own decisions, resolve problems, work co-operatively and deploy basic skills as tools for the rest. OFSTED recognised the professional force of the headteacher being part of curriculum planning, and part of the teaching process, close to standards being achieved.

The political arguments are not for this paper but there is strong evidence arguing that long-term small schools are cheaper, not least because that direct partnership between home and school reduces many of those enormous costs rooted in educational failure, family and community breakdown, vandalism, drugs, street crime, policing and the like, whilst the higher achievement as noted in Scotland brings better qualifications, better jobs and higher tax revenues.

Given joined-up thinking there is no case to close small schools but we wish to engage our Toxic Childhood friends mainly with the power of the model as a contribution to our concerns for childhood. Should you also be interested in the political debate, our particular *"struggle,"* of course we would welcome support but that is not the purpose of this paper.

We wish to offer children small schools in those first vital years of learning and regard it in today's circumstances as essential. May I recommend the OFSTED report on Clutton CE Primary School in Cheshire 10. 1. 08. Not a hint of toxic childhood troubling these 49 pupils. Why do we deny that sort of report to our city kids in Hackney?

In reality what does one find in Hackney? I'm no expert but two friends steeped and expert in the State sector found they just could not do in their 400+, six-storey primary schools what they believed proper education required and so started their own small school literally under the streets of Moorgate. It provides admirably broad education and has had its first good OFSTED report. If the State disowned its big is better and cheaper mentality, which is just not true, the children they felt obliged to leave behind could have what these 105 rather richer children now get by way of privilege.

Forgive this intrusion in your time and attention. I am sure you all agree the answers to many of the problems that rightly concern us need integrated some and school solutions that have some scope for the transformation of society we now urgently need.

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