

Chapter 3:

Educational Factors

It is commonly said that large schools are qualitatively superior to small schools — particularly because they can have broader curricula, but also because they can give their teachers more support. The statement contains some truth, but should be treated with caution.

(a) The Curriculum in Small Schools

Usually, small schools can only offer a limited range of subjects. This may be especially serious at the secondary level, but is also true of primary schools. The range is limited by four main factors:

- * *A Limited Pool of Talent:* Small schools have few teachers, and thus small pools of talent. The smallest schools have only one-teacher. They can only offer what that teacher can teach.
- * *Limited Demand for Specialist Subjects:* Even when teachers *do* have specialist skills, the number of interested pupils may be too small. For example, a small secondary school may have teachers who are able to teach business studies as well as economics, Russian as well as French, and zoology and botany as well as biology; but the number of pupils who want to take those options may be too small to justify the teachers' time.
- * *Limited Demand for Specialist Facilities:* Small schools find it hard to justify costly investment in libraries, computers, science equipment, sports fields, etc. because they would not be used by enough pupils.
- * *Lack of Children for Sports:* Very small schools may not even have enough children to make up a pair of football teams. Thus small schools may even be handicapped in sporting activities.

However, these problems can often be reduced, and sometimes can be avoided altogether. Many governments supplement teachers' skills with radio and television broadcasts; they arrange for schools to share specialist equipment and staff; and they encourage schools to cooperate in sporting and other activities. Some of these strategies will be discussed in later sections of this book.

 * *What Curriculum can a Small Secondary School Offer?* *
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 * *Of course there is no fixed and internationally valid answer to* *
 * *this question. However, some general observations can be* *
 * *made.* *
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 * *Take, for example, a rural secondary school in a developing* *
 * *country. Assume that it has four teachers and 60 pupils spread* *
 * *over three grades.* *
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 * *If at least some staff are prepared to teach more than one* *
 * *subject, such a school can offer five basic subjects, such as* *
 * *English, maths, general science, social studies and a language.* *
 * *Although this curriculum might seem unadventurously* *
 * *academic, it covers the basic requirements for admission to* *
 * *further education. As such it would be favoured by parents. It* *
 * *would also have the merit of being cheap to offer.* *
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(b) The Internal Environment of Small Schools

Small schools are also criticised for their restricted internal social environment:

- * pupils lack competition, and interact with relatively few peers, and
- * pupils may get stuck with the same teacher for an entire school career.

The latter may be particularly unfortunate if the pupils and teachers suffer personality clashes. In a large school, both pupils and teachers get a partial new start every academic year when the pupils move up one grade; but in a small school this is less likely to happen.

The picture has another side, however:

- * small schools usually have a more cooperative environment than large ones, and
- * teachers in small schools can get to know their pupils much better.

The cooperative environment may be particularly important for children who lack self-confidence. This can help both academic and extra-curricular activities: children learn from their peers how to do arithmetic or to recite poetry, for example, and they have better chances of joining the school football team and the school play. One researcher has summarised these benefits:

All the children, by necessity, must be given responsibilities, and must contribute to discussions and assemblies. Thus, they develop more self-confidence. In larger schools, these responsibilities tend to be given to a select few.

(c) Teachers and Teaching in Small Schools

Since the quality of education chiefly depends on the quality of formal teaching, one must ask whether small schools can expect better or worse teaching than large ones.

Although of course the answer will depend on individual contexts, several factors are common:

- * *Teacher Qualifications:* In many countries, teachers in rural areas (where small schools predominate) have fewer formal qualifications. This is for three reasons:
 - ambitious and well qualified staff are able to arrange postings in desirable environments, which usually means suburban or urban ones;
 - administrators find themselves under strong pressure to post the good teachers to suburban and urban communities, who usually have more political power; and
 - remote areas are sometimes used as dumping grounds for teachers who are incompetent or rebellious.
- * *Isolation:* Teachers in small rural schools are professionally more isolated than staff in larger institutions. They have fewer

colleagues with whom to exchange ideas, and it is harder for the central administrators to give them professional support.

- * *Streaming*: Small schools cannot stream pupils according to ability. Indeed, teachers may be faced by multigrade classes and wide age-ranges. This makes teaching more challenging; yet it is uncommon for colleges to give much attention to these matters while the teachers are being trained, so teachers may be poorly prepared for their task.

However, small schools do not always suffer. When administrators ensure that good teachers are posted to small schools, and when the teachers are well supported, the quality of staff and their work can be at least as high as in large schools. Indeed, many teachers feel that their efforts are noticed more readily in small schools. In the more personal atmosphere, they become more committed in their work.

 * *Quality of Schools and Quality of Teachers* *
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 * *In small schools, the quality of education is more dependent on* *
 * *the quality of individual teachers than is the case in big schools.* *
 * *In a single-teacher school, the personality of that individual* *
 * *'makes or breaks' the whole educational process. By contrast,* *
 * *the average quality of teaching in a large school is a* *
 * *combination of the good and the bad. Small schools cannot do* *
 * *so much averaging, so tend to have greater variations.* *
 * *The question then becomes: "Given that small schools are* *
 * *more vulnerable to bad teachers, how can administrators* *
 * *ensure that they are given medium-ability or good ones?"* *
 * *Particular attention must be given to the needs of small schools* *
 * *when teachers are posted and when support mechanisms are* *
 * *discussed.* *
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(d) Size of School and Educational Achievement

It is clear from this discussion that large schools usually have resource advantages which help improve the breadth of the curriculum. However, many observers feel that in the past this factor has been given too much weight. Recent research suggests

that small schools can still provide good (or even better) quality education, with a depth that can more than compensate for a lack of breadth. Some of the conclusions are as follows:

- * One of the most comprehensive studies in the USA covered 218 secondary schools with enrolments ranging from 18 to 2,287. It found that:
 - students from the large schools were *exposed* to a larger number of school activities, and the best of them achieved standards in many activities that were unequalled by students in the small schools. But
 - students in the small schools *participated* in more activities, both academic and extra-curricular; their versatility and performance scores were consistently higher, they reported more satisfaction, and they displayed more motivation in all areas of school activity.

[W.J.Campbell, *School Size: Its Influence on Pupils*, 1980.]

- * Another researcher investigated British primary school pupils' achievements in French. She followed the careers of 17,000 pupils over 10 years, and included small rural schools in her sample. She reported:

"In spite of apparently adverse circumstances, the test performance of the pupils in the small schools was consistently superior to that of the pupils in the large schools".

The Chief reason for this appeared to be:

"The classroom situation in the small school tends to encourage cooperative behaviour and to lack the negative motivational characteristics of the competitive classroom in which success for the few can only be achieved at the expense of failure for the many."

[C. Burstall, *Primary French in the Balance*, NFER, 1974.]

- * Analysis of the 1985 examination results in Alberta, Canada, showed that "pupils in small high schools (under 200 pupils) achieved at or near the provincial average, with some exceeding the average significantly." The same was true at the primary level. [J.S. Farrant, *Improving the Cost-Effectiveness of Small Schools*, The Commonwealth Secretariat, 1986.]

- * “There is no evidence to support the view that small schools are any less educationally viable than large schools. [We have received] several well-founded reports that secondary schools have found pupils from small rural schools not only as well prepared academically as pupils from other schools, but that they generally had a better attitude to work. Having been accustomed to working much of the time on their own, they could be given more responsibility for the organisation of their work.” [R.A.Howells, *Curriculum Provision in the Small Primary School*, 1982.]
- * “The fears often expressed about the limited curriculum of small schools received no support from the visits except in the case of science, which is a weakness by no means restricted to small schools.” [L.C. Comber et al., *The Social Effects of Rural Primary School Reorganisation*, University of Aston, UK, 1981.]
- * “There is no evidence whatsoever from surveys of attainment in Wales that the measured attainments of children in small rural schools are depressed.” [R. Nash, *Conditions of Learning in Rural Primary Schools*, SSRC, 1977.]
- * “There is evidence that some small schools do succeed in offering as wide a curriculum as large schools. The evidence is that small schools can do a great deal to compensate for their size and limited resources, particularly when they have the active support of their local authority.” [*Primary Practice*, The Schools Council, UK, 1983.]

To summarise this chapter, therefore, it appears that small schools may suffer some educational limitations, particularly at the secondary level. However, they also have strong advantages, and supportive education authorities can help them to overcome their problems. By themselves, arguments about the quality of education are rarely strong enough to justify either refusal to open, or decisions to close, small schools.