

Part I:

The Debate on School Size

Chapter 1:

Social Factors

When governments have a choice between one large school or several small schools, they have to assess social, economic and educational factors. The weight they give to each factor depends on specific contexts and on the preferences of individual decision-makers. In many countries, however, recent years have seen more weight being given to social factors. Usually, this has favoured small schools rather than large ones.

(a) Schools as Centres of Social Development

Schools are always major centres for social development. It is usually desirable to have as many centres as possible, and they are especially necessary in rural areas.

Towns have many foci for social interaction. As well as schools, they have government offices, shops, post-offices, hospitals, sports clubs, bars, religious centres, and so on.

Villages, by contrast, have very few foci. In many cases, the only ones are churches/mosques/temples (depending on the culture), and schools.

Thus, if the choice is between (a) several small schools which allow each village to have one or (b) a large school in one village but no schools in the others, the social arguments will almost always

favour the former.

Of course, it cannot be said that several small schools are *always* preferable to a single large one. For example, if a small village has two schools, it may suffer from social division and would be more united if there were only one. Also, large schools sometimes widen pupils' and parents' horizons, helping them to meet people outside their immediate neighbourhood.

However, the generalisation remains true: that it is important for every community to have its own school. This fact usually favours small schools rather than large ones.

 * *The Role of the School in the Community* *
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 * Roy Nash and two colleagues studied five one-teacher schools *
 * in rural Wales. Commenting on the schools' crucial social *
 * roles, they stated: *
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 * "In a rural area where communications are extremely bad, it *
 * is quite enough to have to go to the nearest town for one's *
 * household goods without on top of that having to send one's *
 * children to school in the next parish. The area that was served *
 * by school B had, in fact, no village as such and it represents as *
 * well the typical form of scattered settlement common in many *
 * parts of rural Wales. The one building in the parish which *
 * acted as a central point was the school. This school had built *
 * into its wall a memorial to the community's war dead. To our *
 * eyes it seemed a grim ornament for a school-room, but there *
 * was nowhere else to place it. The school was the people's only *
 * focal point. This cannot be emphasised too much. . . ." *
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 * This community did not even have a church or chapel. But in *
 * any case, the researchers continued: *
 * *
 * "Although church and chapel have far more influence in the *
 * Welsh countryside than they have in urban areas, and clearly *
 * help to integrate the community and give it a sense of identity, *
 * attendance is declining and they no longer hold the central *
 * position that they had only 30 or 40 years ago. The place of *
 * the school as a focal point is therefore possibly of greater *
 * importance today than at any time previously." *
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(b) Implications of the Prominence of Schools

The prominence of schools in rural areas has several implications — both for communities which do have schools and for communities which do not.

(i) Communities which do have Schools

Because schools are important centres for social development in rural areas, even people who do not have school-aged children are likely to take a strong interest in school activities.

Also, because of their links with the outside world, teachers in rural schools tend to play stronger leadership roles than they do in urban areas. And to the extent that alternative sources of information are lacking, the messages conveyed by the schools have particular force.

(ii) Communities which do not have Schools

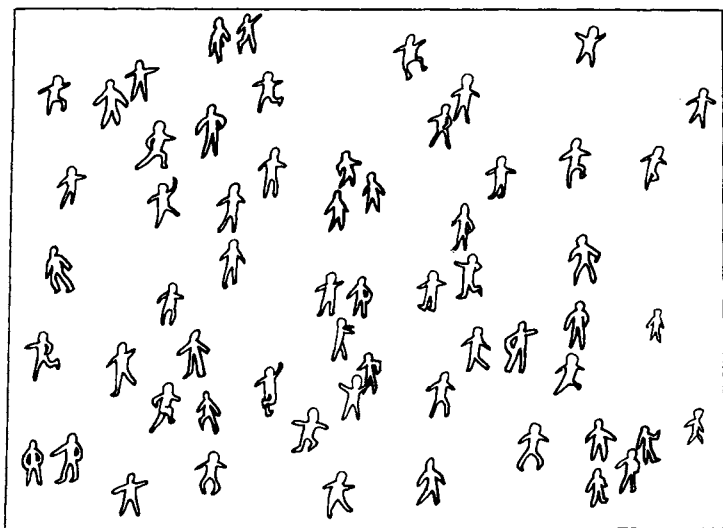
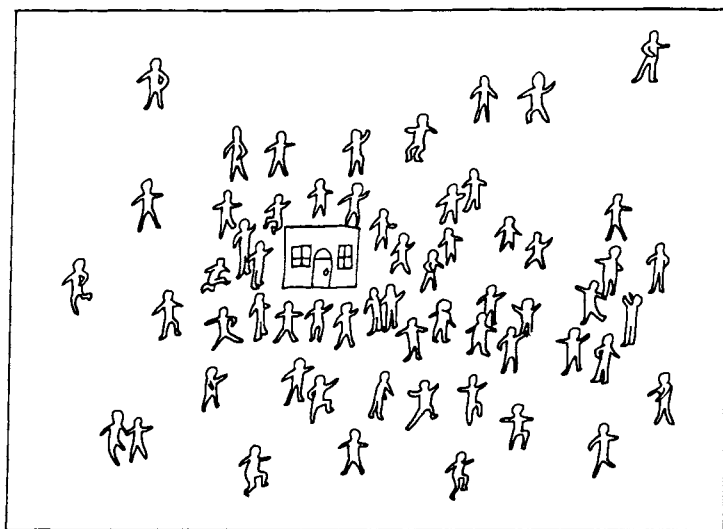
The other side of this coin is that communities without schools are deprived — sometimes even to the point of threatened existence. If children have no educational opportunities at all, the communities are left behind in a fast changing world; and if children leave the community to attend a boarding school somewhere else, the population that remains has been deprived of its young.

Moreover, some parents perceive schools to be so important that they decide to leave rural areas in order to give their children better opportunities in the towns. When this happens, a marginal community becomes even more marginal. The box below gives some statistics on communities which have declined in population, in part because they had no schools.

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* Village Schools and Population Movements *
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* To measure the effect that village schools (or the lack of them) have on *
* population, one researcher examined population changes in Devon, *
* England. *
* The researcher looked at 400 communities which had records for the *
* years 1911 to 1961. Among the communities, 287 had a school *
* throughout the period, but 113 had no school. *
* The study found that communities with a school grew on average by *
* 2% during the period, but communities without a school declined by *
* average of 12%. The population changes, of course, were not caused *
* only by the existence or lack of schools. But schools were certainly a *
* major factor. *
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Especially in a rural area, a school is an important centre for social interaction and development. If the school is closed (or never opened), the community is deprived of such a centre.

(c) Changing Government Policies

Although the arguments about small schools remain hotly debated all over the world, recent years have seen policy swings in several countries. Particularly in industrialised nations, governments are now much more supportive of small schools than they were a few years ago:

- * In New South Wales, Australia, a 1984 Education Commission was “of the view that a Ministerial statement which acknowledges the important of small schools would be most timely”. It stated:

While the closure of some schools may be unavoidable, the Commission considers that this should be the last resort. Such is the educational and community value of small schools that closure should be assessed in terms of benefits to children and to the community as a whole, rather than in terms of operating costs.

- * Likewise, in the United Kingdom, a major report in 1965 led to closure of many small schools. But 13 years later its author felt that the case for small schools was stronger. “With all that we know today,” she wrote, “the policy about village schools needs rethinking.”
- * Similarly, in Norway and Finland many schools closed during the 1960s have been reopened.