

Part IV:

Conclusions

Chapter 9:

Small Schools or Large Schools?

Governments throughout the world need to get the best educational and social benefits from the least expenditure of resources. The title of this book asks: "Are Small Schools the Answer?". It is clear (a) that circumstances vary widely, both within and between countries, and (b) that education authorities have to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages for themselves. It is evident, therefore, that small schools *are* the answer in some circumstances, but that they are not the answer in others.

Going beyond this, some further concluding remarks are needed. This chapter comments on (a) the concept of a minimum viable size, and (b) ways to get the best performance out of small schools.

(a) A Minimum Viable Size?

(i) Policy Variations

Viability is not a scientific notion, applicable in all circumstances. Thus scientists can state, for example, that water freezes at zero degrees Celsius everywhere in the world; but no comparable cut-off point can be determined for school viability.

It follows from this that different governments have different policies. For instance:

- The New Zealand government has set the official minimum size for a school at nine pupils. Cases are examined in-

dividually, but almost all schools are closed as soon as their enrolments fall below nine.

- The Hong Kong government, by contrast, has no official minimum. Some schools are very small: one has only four pupils but two teachers.

One reason why some governments avoid fixed cut-off points is that they sometimes unjustifiably condemn schools to death:

- * There is a danger of schools being closed as soon as enrolments fall below the cut-off point, even though enrolments might rise again in later years; and
- * Threat of closure can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Parents decide not to send their children to the school because they fear that their children's school careers could be disrupted by future school closure; and these decisions mean that enrolments actually do fall below the minimum.

(ii) Common Factors

Whatever policy they finally decide on, however, all governments have to consider certain factors. The following are among them:

Social Factors

- * Schools are very important centres for community development. Closure of schools can seriously damage community cohesion, and opening of schools can greatly improve it. Even though they are expensive, small schools may still be a justifiable investment.
- * On the other hand, communities that focus on small schools are sometimes inward-looking. Interaction of different communities can be encouraged if they all serve a common, larger school.

Economic Factors

- * Small schools usually have higher unit costs. This chiefly arises from low pupil: teacher ratios and low utilisation of such fixed assets as libraries, playgrounds, laboratories, etc..
- * However, they do not always have higher unit costs. Sometimes the pupil:teacher ratios match or even exceed those

of large schools; there are ways to share fixed assets among schools to achieve economies of scale; and large schools sometimes suffer diseconomies of scale because they are too complex.

- * Small schools are likely to be nearer children's homes. This reduces transport costs and helps avoid boarding.

Educational Factors

- * It is hard for small schools to offer broad curricula, (a) because they have few teachers and thus a limited range of skills, and (b) because even when teachers do have a broad range of skills, there may not be enough children to justify subject options.
- * However, there are ways to share teachers among small schools. Also, school broadcasts and correspondence courses can supplement teacher capacity.
- * It is hard for small schools to give children a wide range of social contacts and strong competition.

Large Secondary but Small Primary Schools?

The advantages of medium-sized or large schools may be stronger at the secondary than at the primary level:

1. *It is at the secondary stage that pupils begin to specialise. It is easier to offer a wide range of options when the school is fairly large.*
2. *Because the libraries, laboratories and workshops required for specialisation are expensive, it is important for them to be fully utilised. Unit costs are lowest when the facilities are used by a large number of students.*

At the same time, medium-sized or large secondary schools may also be easier to create. Older pupils do not suffer so much either from boarding or from long daily travel.

And if each community still has its own primary school, the social needs for a secondary school are less urgent.

- * However, small schools usually have a more intimate and cooperative atmosphere. Competition is not always an unmixed blessing.
- * Children in small schools are often more socially mature. This is because they are used to having responsibility both for self-motivation and for supervision of others.

(b) Getting the Best Performance

Almost all governments consider small schools to be desirable in some situations. It is therefore necessary to ask how the schools can best be supported. With particular reference to rural contexts, the following strategies are worth noting:

(i) Finance

- * Recognise that small schools may have higher unit costs in both the recurrent and capital budgets. Give them favourable treatment in financial allocations.

(ii) Staffing

- * During pre-service teacher training courses, examine methods for multigrade work. If teaching practice cannot be arranged in ordinary small schools, set up special model ones.
- * Stress the professional rewards of work in small schools, and try to attract teachers who will take it as a worthwhile challenge.
- * Provide a reasonable career structure. Avoid the situation in which teachers can only get promotion in large schools.
- * Give teachers professional support:
 - in-service courses for staff who have been in small schools for several years and who need to reflect on methods,
 - opportunities to visit other small schools and to exchange ideas,
 - advisory visits by inspectors, and
 - support for associations of teachers in small schools.
- * Train all teachers in at least two subject areas.
- * Examine the potential for mobile teachers and sharing of staff resources.

(iii) Materials and Facilities

- * Devote resources to curriculum development, e.g. special textbooks and self-instructional materials for multigrade classes.
- * Build large classrooms and provide furniture that is easily moved when group work in multigrade classes is needed.
- * Encourage schools that are reasonably close to each other to share equipment and resources.
- * Provide school broadcasts, and bear the needs of small schools specifically in mind during preparation.
- * Establish correspondence courses, and make them available to pupils in small schools.

(iv) Community Involvement

- * Recognise that communities are particularly likely to display a strong interest in the activities of small schools. Make sure that teachers are sensitive to the positive and negative aspects of this fact.
- * Explore ways to use parents and other community members as auxiliary teachers and helpers.
- * Make use of strong community interest to offset the higher costs associated with small schools.