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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS:

A Small Inquiry

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Foreword

Over the last century urbanisation and rural-urban migration have substantially reduced rural populations in the industrialised part of the world and diminished many rural communities, some almost to the point of extinction. Nevertheless, in most European countries around 10 to 30 percent of the population still live in small villages or in sparsely populated areas. The responsibility for providing an equitable basic education for all children, wherever they live, rests with their governments. The aim of the present study is to make available a comparative account of the circumstances under which rural primary education is run in a number of European countries.

As detailed in the introduction, the idea of such a study sprang out of the 2003 Interskola conference in Sweden. In the autumn of 2004, the Research Council of Norway granted money to Nesna University College in Northern Norway for a project called "Education and Growing-up in Sparsely Populated Areas". The project is managed by one of the editors. As the project also deals with comparative aspects of rural education, it is in the interest of the project to release the necessary financial support to allow the present work to be published. Therefore this report is jointly published by the Interskola Network and Nesna University College.

We address our thanks to the Research Council of Norway and Nesna University College for making this publication possible. We wish in particular to record our grateful thanks to Uljas Syväniemi (Finland), Tony Rule (England), Ingrid Sörlin (Sweden), Catherine Mulryan-Kyne (Ireland), Alwyn Evans (Wales) and Rúnar Sigþorsson and Þóra Björk Jónsdóttir (Iceland) for their contributions. We also want to express our special thanks to Alwyn Evans, a long time member of Interskola, who originally took the initiative to mount this kind of inquiry and who has also supported our work throughout the whole process. All the work has been carried out without any kind of financial inducement.

Norwich/Nesna, September 2005

Alan Sigsworth

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INTRODUCTION

The late 1960s was a time of educational reorganisation across Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. The favoured means of meeting the ideal of equal educational opportunity was the large, powerfully resourced school. Efforts to achieve the ideal in rural areas necessarily included the strategies of closing small rural schools and transporting their pupils to distant, large, single-graded schools. Many educators were alarmed by the cavalier fashion in which the education of children was being detached from the communities in which they lived. In 1968, a small group consisting of teachers, teacher trainers and administrators from the United Kingdom and Scandinavia came together to share their experiences of ongoing school reorganisation and related matters. From that first meeting grew the Interskola organization, which, with education in sparsely populated areas as its prime focus, has met annually ever since – an unbroken total of 38 years. The core countries during the first decade of its existence were Norway, Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. Since then, educators from Germany, Poland, the U.S.A., Canada, Russia, Estonia and Africa have been welcomed into the organisation.

During the 1970s and 1980s, despite increasingly determined opposition, a large number of small rural schools were closed in the United Kingdom. Across the same period, whilst some closures did occur, the small schools in the other core Interskola countries were largely left to concentrate upon teaching their pupils and serving their communities. This relatively peaceful period was not to last, for around 1990, new developments at nation level in the latter countries, including shrinking public economies, decentralisation of power and responsibility, and the privatisation of public services have changed the politics and the conditions for organising and running primary schools. The consequences of these developments for small rural schools have, of course, varied from country to country, but in most cases, the result had been an increase in school closures and a more insecure situation for the remaining small rural schools. Whilst it is the case that the countries of the United Kingdom currently demonstrate a positive attitude to the retention of small schools and, while school closures are at a low level at present, it is also the case that a sense of insecurity remains, for it is the small school that is invariably at risk when local school reorganisation is considered.

In 2003, the Interskola conference met in Dömle, Sweden. There, the idea was conceived of mounting an inquiry into the present state of small multi-graded schools in rural areas. We were asked to create an inquiry framework, to identify individuals with substantial experience in rural education and to invite them to contribute to the inquiry. Responses were received from six of the original core countries - Ireland, Wales, Norway, Sweden, Finland and England, together with a contribution from Iceland.

We asked our contributors to begin by reflecting upon the changes which have affected small multi-grade schools in their countries over the past fifty years and after that, to consider and comment upon six aspects of the small multi-grade school and its context.

First, small multi-grade rural schools are particularly vulnerable to the decisions of policy

makers, for it is generally the case, even in countries with substantial rural areas, that an urban model of schooling provides the dominant educational template. Here the inquiry interest lies in how small schools are currently being affected by recent policies and decisions deployed at both national and local level.

Second, small multi-graded schools require forms of pedagogy and curriculum organisation suited to their scale and their mixed-age classes. These are naturally different from, and more complex than, those employed in single-age classes. The question here is whether national and local government provision, via their policy documents, guidelines and pre- and in-service education, offer adequate support and training for the staffs of multi-grade schools.

Third, the small rural school with perhaps two or three teachers must provide a curriculum of the same depth, spread and quality as that offered by a large school. In a small school it is important that the vital resource - the small staff - is not dissipated by the demands of routine administration and housekeeping. Here then, the question is the extent to which policymakers recognise the need to provide adequate clerical, administrative and para-professional support in order for the teachers to teach to maximum efficiency.

Fourth, one of the essential requirements for effective education in the multi-grade class is that the class is small - smaller than the single-age class. Further, special needs provision offers a particular challenge to small schools. What is of interest here is the degree to which the need for the multi-grade class to be small is recognised and its maximum size defined by regulation.

Fifth, a common charge against the small school is that their pupils prosper less well than their peers in large schools. True or false?

Sixth, the contributors were given free rein to identify other contemporary issues and problems confronting the small multi-graded school.

Finally, we asked for speculation on the prospects and possible future problems for small rural primary schools, together with recommendations for the development of such schools.

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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS: A WELSH PERSPECTIVE

Alwyn Evans

1. THE PAST

The decline in small rural schools in Wales over the past 50 years parallels the decline in rural economies and farming, and the reduction in family size. It is also exacerbated by planning decisions which hinder or prevent development outside key villages; thus smaller communities, with few facilities, tend to decay.

The process has not been consistent, since it has often been stimulated at specific periods by national reports that concentrated on the viability or otherwise of schools of a certain size. The Plowden report in England, and its parallel Gittins report in Wales in 1967, for instance, both stressed that in their view, to be educationally viable the school needed to have a minimum of 50 pupils and three staff. In the majority of cases however, the prime consideration has been not educational viability but the financial cost of keeping open small schools, where the per head figure for a school of under 30 is often twice or three times as great as the average for the Local Education Authority [LEA].

In the pre-1974 period, Wales was still divided into the 13 original counties, together with a number of boroughs and city/town councils. Each was responsible for a LEA; this was indeed a major function of its existence. In most rural LEAs, such as Carmarthenshire, Caernarfonshire, Meirioneth and Cardiganshire a gradual attritional process took place over the years from the end of the Second World War to 1974, where small schools with declining populations were closed. Overall, this was not generally the result of specific policy, but rather a response to the situation on the ground, sometimes motivated by current national educational reports, but more often the result of a significant decline in population in a particular locality or area.

On occasion however, as in one well-documented school, Ysgol y Dderi, Llangybi in Cardiganshire/Dyfed in 1976, a deliberate policy decision to 'improve' the provision of rural education saw the closure of five small schools housed in old and inadequate buildings and replacement by a purpose built 'Area Community School' This attracted some opposition, but also a great deal of support because of the innovative nature of the building and the carefully thought out planning for linguistic and cultural identity. The plan was written up at the time by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in Wales as a model for future developments.

With local government reorganisation in 1974 into eight large counties – coinciding as it did with growth of the small schools' movement (in England, the National Association of Small Schools) - pressure to close schools generally reduced, and opposition to closure on a national and local scale was better orchestrated. Any actual closures were often based upon sound arguments about educational rather than economic grounds. Where the new counties and their LEAs worried at all about school size, they tended to look for more original solutions, such as 'twinning' two or more schools under one headteacher,

and cluster support systems, with shared teachers and joint planning. Some schools did close, but only after extensive consultation with parents as to where they saw the future of their school. In several cases where the LEA started to consider a school's future, the strength of local feeling caused them to retract very rapidly. In many cases, the locally perceived excellence of the head or teachers was the key factor.

In the 1980s, the decision of the then Conservative government to allow schools to opt out of LEA control and to be directly grant funded from the central government immediately put an end to any consideration of closure by virtually all the LEAs for the next fifteen years and more. For instance, Powys LEA attempted early on in this period to close Llanerfyl school (Ysgol Llanerfyl) – with only 26 pupils on roll – and to combine it with nearby Ysgol Dyffryn Banw. The result was a revolt by parents, governors and staff of Ysgol Llanerfyl who applied successfully to the Welsh Office (the decision-making body at that time) for 'grant-maintained' status, giving them virtual independence from the LEA and full decision-making powers directly funded from the Welsh Office. This funding provided not only their normal financial allocation, but a 'notional figure' which corresponded to all the other services that it was judged that they should have received from the LEA – this immensely enlarged annual sum, together with easy access to capital grants, enabled the school to prosper and expand. Few LEAs even considered closure of their rural schools after this case.

On the other hand, the Conservative government had also brought in a funding formula basis for financing all schools; this formula was to a very large degree (over 80%) led by pupil numbers – this basic funding formula still remains in use today. Though different LEAs built in compensating factors for size and features such as language mix, this caused, and still causes, major problems to many governing bodies in funding small schools adequately, particularly staffing. Local Management of Schools (where the governing bodies and the head took far more direct control of budget and decision making from the LEAs) was also brought in at this time, though governing bodies, unused to taking financial responsibility, often fell back on LEAs for assistance.

LEAs also had other things on their minds – a further local government reorganisation in 1996 saw the creation of 22 Unitary County Authorities[UAs] across Wales, to replace the previous mix of eight County Councils (which had education functions) and District Councils (which did not)). These steps were taken by the Conservative government of the day ostensibly to reorganise local government and make it more coherent. The real reason was to break the power base in Wales of the predominantly Labour County Councils, and the resultant reorganisation also saw many further functions - and direct financial control - removed from the new UAs and transferred directly to schools and their governing bodies. The UAs still retained their LEAs, which were left with strategic planning responsibilities, but many fewer powers to carry out these responsibilities and little finance or manpower to plan effectively. Thus for the immediate period after local government reorganisation, school reorganisation was a low priority in most LEAs.

With the return of a new Labour government in 1997, the climate changed again. Grant-aided schools were re-integrated into LEAs as 'Foundation Schools' and the main

financial benefit of 'Foundation' status disappeared. The Welsh Office, which had administered aspects of government in Wales on behalf of the British Government, was replaced in 1999 by the newly formed Welsh Assembly Government, which had acquired devolved powers and responsibility for funding and strategy of education at all primary and secondary levels.

2. THE PRESENT

Over the past five and a half years, there has been increasing pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government for LEAs to examine the efficiency and value for money of their strategies and policies - the so-called 'Best Value' policy. All LEAs have seen the difficulties that funding was creating for their smaller schools. They are also finding themselves under pressure because of what they see as insufficient financial allocation from central government to fund the formulae that finance all schools. Consequently they have reviewed their overall provision and in many cases, actively pursued schemes for closure. Even in urban and industrial areas, a process of closure of inadequate buildings and a policy of reduction of 'surplus places', and in particular the unification of infant and junior schools, has reduced the number of schools. In a significant number of rural LEAs, however, there has been a deliberate policy of targeting smaller schools and often this has been tied in to arguments on 'educational benefit'. It cannot be denied, however, that the overall underlying consideration has always been financial.

Two circulars from the National Assembly are relevant to the discussion about the future of small schools in Wales.

- 1 *No. 23/02: School Organisation Proposals (July 2002);*
- 2 *No. 34/03: Area Schools (December 2003)*

The first of these lists key considerations when LEAs decide to change their provision, one of which includes the effect any change might have on the quality and standard of education. LEAs are also required to consider relevant themes in a key 'paving' document from the Welsh Assembly Government outlining their vision for educational provision in Wales over the forthcoming decade. This document, entitled 'The Learning Country' (Welsh Assembly Government 2001), states that the learner's needs are paramount and that there is a need to reduce inequalities between area, groups and individuals. Any tentative proposals would have to satisfy the following criteria:

- 1 Improve the standard of education in the area;
- 2 Ensure a broad and balanced curriculum, including all the relevant elements of the curriculum for all age groups that are affected.
- 3 A cost effective use of public resources including transport costs, long term environmental costs, and rebuilding costs.

LEAs have also had to show the Welsh Assembly Government how they intend to reduce surplus places (i.e. buildings and classrooms which, in theory, were not being used for the notional numbers of pupils that could be accommodated) by preparing a School Organisation Plan detailing planning of their provision over a period of five years. This

needs to show:

- 1 Whether a different use of a school building makes the best and most effective use.
- 2 How any change in the pattern of provision affects the use made by the community of that school.
- 3 Any investment that is needed to ensure that the building is adequate for teaching the school curriculum.

In the case of rural schools, there is also a need to consider:

- 1 The challenges faced by very small schools.
- 2 Transport provision. The proposals should not entail primary pupils having to travel for more than 45 minutes one way.
- 3 The effect of school closure on the community in general and the extent to which the school serves the whole community as a learning resource.

Small schools are duty bound to provide the same curricular and social opportunities for their pupils as do other, larger schools for their pupils.

In addition to the above circulars, a more recent report to the Welsh Assembly Government Lifelong Learning Committee on 18th March 2004 states that there will be no presumption for or against closure, but that advantages and disadvantages of individual cases will be considered. However, the same report calls on LEAs to pay particular attention to:

- 1 primary schools with less(*sic*) than four teachers;
- 2 year groups regularly containing less(*sic*) than 8 to 10 pupils;
- 3 head teachers with a substantial teaching load;
- 4 mixed age classes containing more than two year groups or cross Key Stage teaching;
- 5 schools with more than 25% surplus places (and more than 30 places unfilled).

Policy formulation and financial considerations – ‘Best Value’

A major pressure upon LEAs, has been a series of inspections over the past four years carried out jointly by Estyn (the reorganised Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Schools in Wales) and the National Audit Commission, to examine ‘Best Value’. The Audit Commission’s stated requirement is that every LEA should aim at school occupancy rates between 85% and 105% of the notional accommodation – a target that translates into no more than 10% of unfilled places across the LEA as a whole. Under this pressure, which is given ‘teeth’ by the publication for public scrutiny of the inspection reports, every LEA in Wales has been forced to examine if its provision provides ‘value for money’, both at primary and secondary level. It is therefore no surprise that virtually every LEA in Wales has come forward with reorganisation plans that involve closure and amalgamation of schools – in both urban and rural areas.

In the majority of cases, all schools are first examined and a combination of factors such as:

- 1 Proximity to other schools;
- 2 Availability of space in nearby schools;
- 3 The journey to school;
- 4 Number of pupils attending;
- 5 Number of pupils forecast over coming years

are used to identify a list of schools which will be highlighted for closer attention. This has happened in different ways in different LEAs. Some case studies are listed below:

Powys

Following the whole county review in response to 'Best Value', a dozen schools were highlighted; however, after massive consultation over a period of three years, only two schools of under 20 pupils, Libanus and Trecastle, were finally earmarked for closure. Even these two schools gained a stay of execution until summer 2005 when they finally closed. Concentrated local campaigns with much publicity have kept open Llandinam, Sarn, Llanfihangel and Llangurig, the last of which also had fewer than 20 pupils.

Problems with the building in Llanrhaeadr YM school will require construction of a new school soon and at this point, nearby Llangedwyn school, which draws a number of pupils from across the border in England, may well come under consideration under an 'area school' umbrella. However, the latter school has grown from 17 pupils to 50 over the past four years and as the only 'faith' school in the area, with a different linguistic-cultural balance, is likely to result in stern opposition to closure.

In the south of this scattered county, over 100 miles from top to bottom, provisional plans for the Ystradgynlais area involve a new school to replace Glanrhyd, Gurnos and Cwmtwrch schools - these areas though now apparently rural, in fact form the remnants of former industrial villages which have now declined. In addition, two small schools in the north of the county, Llanwddyn and Pennant, have been designated as a 'federated' school under the one head.

Pembrokeshire

From local government reorganisation in 1996 onward, vigorous reorganisation plans have been pursued, even in advance of 'Best Value' pressures. Even in the initial period 1996-2001, when few LEAs had acted, five schools were closed and four were federated under the same head (though this federation has now largely been disbanded). A School Organisation Plan published in 2001 considered 'rationalisation' of school places. The primary sector was identified as having 21% 'surplus school places'. This however, included spaces, which schools had adapted as libraries, halls, for community use, and of course several classrooms, which would, if the 'notional' number were accommodated, be uncomfortably crowded! A range of solutions has been proposed including closure, building of purpose-built area schools, 'mothballing', and federation under one

headteacher.

In practice, the policy in Pembrokeshire has been to examine a specific area at a time – so Dinas, and Trewyddel, small schools of about 20 pupils were closed and pupil moved the short distance to Bro Ingli, which became an area school for the North Pembrokeshire coast, housed in a new building, in September 2002. A year later in central Pembrokeshire, Penffordd closed, and pupils moved to improved facilities at Maenclochog school. A larger scheme to close Hermon and Blaenffos and to house pupils in a Crymych ‘area’ primary school where rebuilding is desperately needed was approved by the Assembly Government in 2003. It ran into considerable legal challenges from parents of Hermon school (only 2 miles from Crymych along a straight road, but housed in a sound building, and full to capacity with 53 pupils), who were granted permission for a judicial review of the decision; however, this has been rejected in High Court in 2004, and the reorganisation is now going ahead.

It must be said that though the effect may well be the same as in other LEAs, the process of examining each local area and consulting with that area in detail on their scheme has been more successful in Pembrokeshire than the overall ‘county-wide’ School Organisation Plans that have been the feature of so many other counties including neighbouring Carmarthenshire, where widespread and vociferous opposition has been encountered. Only in the case of Hermon did the LEA initially appear to bite off more than it could chew in the face of a vigorous parent campaign, but even there, support from the Welsh Assembly Government and the High Court decision appear to have vindicated its course of action.

Denbighshire

When Ysgol Nantglyn’s roll fell to seven pupils in 1999, the parents themselves decided that the school was no longer a viable unit and opted to avail themselves of the free transport offered by the LEA to carry their children to a nearby school.

However, overall, the LEA was quite late among Welsh LEAs in putting forward its reorganisation plans as a response to ‘Best Value’. In late 2004, it launched a scheme, (which even before its launch was leaked to the public, and attracted vociferous and sustained parental and community opposition), to close or amalgamate 14 small rural primary schools in the rural centre and south of the county and to build three new urban schools in the north of the county. Immediately prior to this proposal, the LEA parted company with its Director of Education, in circumstances that are still confidential. There is considerable speculation across Wales that this prominent educationist’s possible opposition to these closure proposals may well have been the reason for her enforced departure.

Following the extensive protests, these proposals were withdrawn in some disarray by the County Council early in 2005, but the County Council has warned that new proposals will be forthcoming.

Gwynedd

In Gwynedd, a large and very rural county, where the Welsh language is strongest, over two thirds of primary schools have fewer than 90 pupils. Over 20% have fewer than 33 pupils including part-time nursery pupils. There are two schools where the number of pupils has been fewer than ten during the past two years. However, both schools remain open at the time of writing.

There have been various attempts to set up pilot projects involving clustering small schools over the last twenty years but with only very limited success. For instance there were attempts to twin schools as a reaction to failure to recruit headteachers for one of the schools – a common problem in this rural county; these were temporary solutions to a specific problem. When a small school head's post becomes vacant, it is current Gwynedd policy to offer a series of options to governors, including clustering or a federation, before considering advertising the post. However, in all cases thus far, the governors have opted to advertise for a new head.

Of all the LEAs, Gwynedd is one of the few that has so far resisted pressure to put forward a comprehensive county-wide 'Best Value' scheme which involves wholesale closures. It is by no means certain how long this opposition can continue in face of Audit Commission expectations; a recent working party has produced a report for the LEA.

Monmouthshire

In Monmouthshire a largely rural county, a whole-LEA review concluded that no specific targeting of small schools should occur; a series of seven policy documents, adopted in January 2003, highlighted factors such as the state of the school building, capability to deliver the National Curriculum (Physical Education [PE] and Information Technology [IT] were a major concern) and the issue of surplus places.

The LEA's main focus was on combining infant and junior schools; the current re-organisation plan in Abergavenny intends to replace 5 town infant and junior schools, with two primary schools (providing for 4-11 years) and future schemes are planned for other urban and semi-urban areas. One rural school has closed recently, Lanellen, which had 18 children, as a result of an approach by the governing body who considered that their situation was no longer viable. In the only specific rural reorganisation, there are proposals to replace Llanover, Gofilon and Llanfoist schools with an area school, but a decision has not yet been made on the location of this school

In all the above exemplars, though there are good educational reasons put forward, including the provision of up-to-date facilities and buildings, the major motivatory factor for action is still 'value for money'. Schools are still funded on a pupil-led formula, larger schools consider that they subsidise small schools and many resent the resources that they see as being unfairly channelled to the smaller units. In predominantly rural LEAs of South-West, Mid and North West Wales, a school over 100 pupils is regarded as a 'large school'.

Some apparently more enlightened policies for rural development have ensued – often motivated by the valuable principle (expounded in Jonathan Sher’s 1978 handbook *‘Revitalising Rural Education’*) of “The primacy of local circumstance.” In no cases has there been a blanket policy decision on closure of school below a specific size.

Though there are clearly exceptions in some key villages and areas, numbers in primary schools, taken overall, still show steady decline, with an ageing rural population and smaller family size. The costs of such smaller school units also skew the county’s overall funding formula considerably. There is increasing and continuous pressure upon the LEAs from the District Auditor of the Audit Commission to ensure ‘Best Value’. However, added pressure is also brought on heads of small schools with the increased demands of performance management of staff, curricular change and work-load agreements. It is also foreseen that if Welsh Assembly Government aspirations are fulfilled, all heads will have at least half their timetable free of class contact over the next 3 years – a difficult concept to foresee in a 1.5 teacher school already facing financial restrictions!

Professional Support and Organisation

As decision-making has increasingly been devolved to the school governing bodies over the past 25 years, together with the finance to purchase services, so it has been more and more difficult for smaller LEAs to provide effective support, both curricular and otherwise. Almost all LEAs will provide a finance officer’s advice and support for the schools budgeting, which has become increasingly the responsibility of the headteacher and governors, often with little or no direct administrative support within the school. Each LEA will also have some kind of ‘designated officer/adviser’ who will have responsibility for front-line contact with that school, and often for monitoring its performance for the purposes of the LEA. However, support systems for curriculum and management vary widely. There are in general few specific rural schools’ support systems, though in several LEAs, general support teams are available. These often work on a ‘service level agreement’ basis for the school, which decides what services it will buy, for instance, curriculum and in-service support, maintenance and support of IT equipment and in-service training, or school grounds maintenance. The largest and most effective support teams are where arrangements have been made for a team to work across the boundaries of several LEAs and where a significant proportion of the schools have bought in to a service level agreement. There, the size of the team is sufficient to be flexible and provide the full range of services, as is the case across the Isle of Anglesey and Gwynedd LEAs, and for a group of the South Wales LEAs served by ESIS support services. Schools in several other LEAs have a much more attenuated support system.

In Flintshire, when headteachers in small schools complained that it was difficult for them to prepare for prestigious initiatives such as the ‘Investors in People’ awards because of the scarcity of spare time for administration and other writing tasks, the county advisory service reacted by setting up a number of accredited courses on subject and school leadership.

Small schools in the Wrexham area, for example, have all benefited from additional funding via a “Small & Rural Schools Grant” from the LEA. In addition, the LEA seconded a headteacher to coordinate a network project as part of this initiative. The focus for their work in the last academic year is “The planning, assessment, recording and reporting of non-core subjects”.

A recent initiative in Gwynedd has seen six part-time secondments, mostly for a term at a time, where heads and class teachers have channelled their specialisms into helping small schools develop their managerial skills as well as raising standards in various curricular subjects. Managerial aspects include the use of IT to reduce bureaucracy and the induction of new heads, and curricular aspects have included the development of oracy, and design and technology, as well as cultural aspects.

Clusters of schools in several LEAs, have also been able to bid for money to take part in new and innovative initiatives. As much as £5000 [7,000 euros] has been awarded to individual clusters who have pledged to transport pupils and teachers from one school to another in order to reduce age differences of classes and harness the individual talents of teachers. This money has nevertheless not been enthusiastically taken up in all areas. There is no doubt that as Alexander *et al* [1992] found, ‘effective inter-school liaison is impeded by fears surrounding the loss of individual school autonomy and logistical barriers caused by the nature of rural localities.’ Nonetheless the LEAs have continued to encourage closer co-operation between clusters of schools and many headteachers work actively together to nullify inter-school competition.

Curriculum support and training

Many considerations outlined in the previous section also hold good for curriculum support, though the LEA will also wish along with curriculum support, to ensure it has an effective mechanism to fulfil its own statutory monitoring function for performance and development of schools. Support will also depend on the degree on which the school wishes to ‘buy in’ support out of its delegated budget.

In Gwynedd and Anglesey, where all schools still ‘buy in’ to the service, the LEAs support teams have been proactive in helping their small schools deliver the National Curriculum to mixed age classes by preparing units of work with differentiated tasks, as well as schemes of work for all subjects. The presence of a substantial shared cross-boundary team of curriculum advisers is a clear advantage here.

One pattern that has been successful for curriculum as well as management in a number of rural LEAs is the cluster group where primary schools feeding the same secondary school have worked together and shared in-service training and curriculum and policy development between themselves. Often one teacher will act as the ‘curriculum leader’ for that cluster and will advise across schools and receive and provide training in that field. This is far more prevalent in rural areas, where there is little possible parental choice of schools.

In more urban areas, where parental choice of schools is more often exercised,

competition between schools causes problems and inhibits co-operation. However, the Welsh Assembly Government, though not denying parental choice, has over recent years stressed the natural co-operation and continuity of clusters of schools in the same notional 'catchment area' and has stressed continuity of curricular planning and experience between those schools. Such clusters have also been the means of sharing expensive equipment, sports co-operation (joint sports teams) and in some cases, shared teaching. These are still the exception rather than the rule.

Special Needs

One of the areas where the LEAs still retain responsibility is in the fields of special needs support services. Each school is required to ensure early identification of pupils with Special Needs and their placement on a series of stages – the first of which is the 'school support' stage. At the second stage ('school support plus') support from the LEA, often in the form of advice or a programme of action rather than direct manpower support, is provided. However, the LEA is expected at the third and subsequent stage of referral to co-operate to form a statement of needs for the pupil, which will specify the support that is required, both from the school, and from the LEA, and also the parents' role. There are continual complaints from schools, particularly in rural areas, about LEAs' inability to carry out their functions adequately, and statements that are completed too slowly to benefit the individual pupil. However, even in rural areas, the position has improved somewhat and a far greater proportion of the overall LEA budget now provides support for pupils with Special Educational Needs.

Pupil Achievement

Results of Standard Assessment Tasks and Teacher Assessment at the ages of 7 and 11 have been over the past years co-ordinated, collated and published so that all schools can assess their performance alongside benchmark performance for school of a similar nature (identified as schools which have a similar free school meals percentage). However, over the past three years, the compulsory use of tests at the age of 7 has been abolished in schools in Wales, though virtually all schools use voluntary tests at that age and compile their internal data. Even so, no national figure on performance of schools *of a particular size* exists and no research has been done on this. Indeed, schools that have fewer than 5 pupils in their year group are specifically exempted from having to publish their figures in the Estyn inspection reports on schools that are published at 5 or 6 year intervals and in the schools' own annual reports to parents. Thus, reliable data on performance of rural and small schools in Wales is not available.

Nevertheless, a number of individual LEAs, as part of their services to schools, have supplied their schools with locally correlated benchmark data which enables them to compare their performance with that in schools of similar size within their LEA, and also with schools in the cluster of primary schools that feed the same secondary school. The process of target-setting shared between the schools and LEA has enabled the majority of schools also to drive up their performance targets over the past years – evidence of the degree of this performance improvement broken down by schools' size and rurality is, however, anecdotal, and though the information is in theory available from the Welsh Assembly Government's database, it has not been released. It is also true to say that even

the data available covers only English, mathematics and science, and - in Welsh-speaking schools – Welsh.

Contemporary issues and problems

- 1 There is continued pressure by the Welsh Assembly Government and through the Audit Commission and Estyn, on the small and relatively powerless County Councils and their LEAs, to raise schools' standards and to reduce costs. This is often expressed in their exhortations to 'take surplus places out of the system'.
- 2 However, the Welsh Assembly Government is ambivalent in its attitude, the Minister for Education often expounding on the importance of maintaining small schools in viable communities. On balance however, she has been more likely to favour the LEAs' attempts to close schools (she and the Assembly Government have the final decision in such matters) than to keep schools open.
- 3 Increased emphasis on IT as a teaching medium has certainly increased teachers' capability to use equipment and to provide a greater range of resources. Most schools and pupils also make substantial use of the Internet to source information. However, one cannot say that rural schools have been any more in the forefront of this activity than urban schools and the lack of numbers of adults in them makes it, if anything, less likely that pupils will have extensive IT experience. The National Grid for Learning[NGfL] in Wales provides the opportunity for teachers to share resources and exemplar lessons and for pupils to access direct educational materials, but is still in its early days, only just over two and a half years old.

3. THE FUTURE

One cannot but see a continued attritional process whereby the smallest schools are continually under threat. Since those in West and North Wales tend also to be in areas where the Welsh language is strongest, the issue of school closure or continuance is tied to the whole question of cultural, linguistic and social identity. In areas such as these, which are also attractive holiday and retirement destinations for incomers from England and other locations, it impinges on vital local issues of affordable homes and work for the indigenous population.

Another problem, unlikely to reduce, particularly in the more rural and Welsh-speaking areas, is a lack of teachers prepared to take up the posts of headteacher, which are increasingly seen as onerous and under-supported.

Pressure from the District Office of the Audit Commission on the LEAs to examine and take out 'surplus' school places, and to bring staff/pupil ratios (the major factor in operational costs) closer to national averages, will also continue. Every LEA is expected to show progress upon the 5-year strategic plans, which will ensure 'best value' and improved performance.

However, countering this, parent and community organisations such as those in Hermon [Pembrokeshire], Carmarthenshire, Powys and Denbighshire are becoming more

sophisticated in their campaigns of opposition, and readier to use legal challenges where they consider it will delay or halt closure.

In conclusion, there will continue to be small schools in rural areas for the indefinite future. The old argument that small rural schools were ‘uneconomic’ seems largely to have disappeared. Certainly delivery of education in rural areas is more expensive, but delivery of every service is expensive – this does not mean that rural areas are therefore to be shut down!

Education services also cannot be considered in isolation. - the effect on other aspects of community provision must also not be undervalued. If there is no school in a village, other services such as shop and post office also tend to disappear, and young parents are less likely to seek a home in the village. It is also the most fragile communities, linguistically and culturally, that are most likely to suffer from such closures

A more sensitive and sophisticated series of arguments concentrating on the ‘best interests’ of pupils now seems to be underway – however, we should not forget that behind all these surface arguments, still lie the simple financial factors of reducing costs within a narrow interpretation of ‘value for money’ and making services more ‘cost-effective’.

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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS: A SWEDISH PERSPECTIVE

Ingrid Sörlin

1. THE PAST

The first education act on basic education in Sweden of 1842 stated that "... in every town or in each rural parish there ought to be at least one, preferably permanent, school having a certificated (vederbödigen godkand) teacher". Due to geographically large widespread parishes, such parish schools or "folk schools" were not within reach of large numbers of children. Consequently, so-called "minor folk schools" (Swedish: mindre folkskola) were established. These schools, in which non-trained teachers were accepted, were generally of lower standards than the "real" (Swedish: egentliga) folk schools. Though their numbers decreased from the 1920s onwards, such extraordinary solutions to rural education were not formally done away with until the 1958 primary education act.

It may be because of the official Swedish perception of, and attitude towards, small rural schools that schools large enough to apply mono-grade teaching were termed A-schools, whereas those practising multi-grade teaching were titled B-schools. However, in the post-War years, the education acts, as well as the subsequent national curricula, have aimed at equalising the quality of rural and urban primary education and of small and large schools. Given that around 2 million of the 9 million Swedish population are to be found in rural areas, such equality in the education provision may be seen as a precondition for meeting the national goal of sustainable, well-functioning and adequately served communities and employment regions in all parts of the country (Naringsdepartementet 2000).

In Sweden, the definition of a small rural school is, "A rural school with at most 50 pupils between 6 and 13 years old". In 1997, the National Rural Development Agency (Glesbygdsverket), a government agency responsible for promoting the positive development of rural, sparsely populated and archipelago areas in Sweden, asked the local communities about the rural schools' situation. There were about 600 small schools and of these, 20 were threatened, whilst another 90 were talked about as potential closures. Through 1997 and 1998, school closures in rural areas were fairly prevalent. After a few relatively quiet years the restructuring process regained momentum in 2002 and is ongoing. Almost one in five of the rural schools faces the absolute threat of being closed down.

Thirty years ago in 1974, we counted 1065 rural schools which met the definition, almost twice as many as there are today. In earlier times, there were more small schools in the vicinity of the villages. Many of those have ceased to exist and school buses now transport the children to central schools.

The situation is probably due to a combination of factors such as local authorities struggling with financial problems as a result of recession, the decrease in the number of students resulting from families moving into towns, where the jobs are to be found and also, a decline in the birth rate in recent years.

2. THE PRESENT

At the moment, the newspapers, both local and specialist papers like “Land” (The Country) focus on what is going on in Sweden, with headlines such as *School death, Closing of small schools is increasing, Shock: 1000 schools threatened by closure, Desperate fight for doomed schools*, and so on.

The consequences of small school closure. So far, there is no research into the consequences for small villages of a decision to close their school. The communities need to think more about the effects of a school closure on such matters as community depopulation, unemployment and increased travel for pupils and parents. There is more to school closure than saving money.

There is also a big difference in how communities deal with the problem. School reform in the '90s, which granted local authorities substantial freedom to solve problems of school organisation themselves, when the cost of schools was transferred from the central government to local communities, has resulted in the latter experiencing increased economic difficulties. In the comprehensive reform of the state subsidy system in 1993, the earmarked subsidies for specific activities was replaced by a single financial grant to the community, thus devolving responsibility on to the local authority for decisions on how the money is distributed among its various services. Now, there is a model that enables administrators to work out how many schools a local authority needs, based on where the school children live, and the distances that they may be required to travel to reach a more distant school.

Decisions on school organisation and class size. The local authority is now free to decide about the organisation of their schools and there are no longer any limitations on how many pupils are allowed in a school class. Within the community policy, the headmaster is free to organise the schools within his/her responsibility as she/he decides.

Approaches to small school closure. Local authorities, which are responsible for their schools, handle the closure issue in a variety of ways. In some cases, local debate is welcomed and great emphasis is placed upon the investigation of different approaches and the consequences of closure for the community. In other cases, closure is seen solely as an issue for the school itself and other aspects, such as how it will affect conditions for community growth and the provision of services, are not taken into consideration.

Financial support. There are no longer any regulations which give specially dedicated money for a small school within the system of local decision-making. No special financial support is provided from the government.

Professional support. In Sweden, no dedicated professional support is provided for small rural primary schools. In the Curriculum of 1962 there was a special section for B-schools, for example, in relation to the organisation of multi-grade classes, how to organize, group work, different subjects approaches and so on. It was meant to help teachers in rural schools who commonly had small numbers of pupils of different ages and necessarily had to put them together in mixed age classes, for instance, Years 1-3, 4-

6 or 1-2, 3-4 and 5-6.

Multi-grade teaching. It is interesting that in the last twenty years, and despite the apparent dislike of small schools, where multi-grade classes are the norm, the method of teaching in mixed age groups has become a trend even in large central schools. In these schools, multi-grade organisation has been focused on primary pupils aged 6-9 in the first instance. From the politicians' viewpoint, this trend may be seen as a matter of saving money, whilst dedicated teachers have found it to be a way of creating a better climate in the classroom and a more profitable way of teaching, which enhances its social aspect. In-service training has been organised for all primary teachers, not simply those in sparsely populated areas. To my knowledge, no effort has been made to develop school networks which focus on this area. Nor is there very much related research, which means that we know little about it.

Administrative assistance. I am not aware of any administrative help especially in respect of small rural schools.

Regulations relating to the size and staffing of multi-grade classes and special needs' provision. Around 1990, when the state had the responsibility, such regulations existed. Since that time, when the communities have been free to make their own decisions, we have been more dependent on decisions made at the local level and, of course, they are made in the light of the community's overall economy and the demands of the various sectors of responsibility.

Pupil attainment. The defenders of small schools regard them as having special qualities, amongst which are close relationships with the local community, more individual teaching and learning and a sense of security. Other people assert that it is difficult for a small rural school to provide an education which is equal to that offered by a bigger school with more resources. In 1996, the National Agency for Education (Skolverket) carried out a research study, *Equality - a shared responsibility* (Skolverket 1996). The Swedish research and the foreign studies which were also cited, came to the same conclusion: "The size of a school has no impact on the result". Nine schools in six communities in Västerbotten's county och Västernorrland were examined. In spite of different circumstances, there were no differences in basic pupil knowledge. Students with special needs received the support they required in both large and small schools, but how the help was organised was different. Although very small schools had no special needs teacher, the small groups compensated and the teachers had more time to individualise their teaching. One clear difference was in the degree of subject choice, where the bigger schools could offer a greater range. The research noted that small schools can be vulnerable - for instance they can experience difficulties in recruiting teachers, though such schools seemed able to find their own creative solutions. No dramatic differences were found with respect to the social aspect of schooling, such as bullying and the pupils' attitudes to their school. The report also pointed out the importance of the school as a symbol for the community, its importance for local identity and as a factor in the survival of the community. It also observed that schools are often seen as a central part of the local community's infrastructure and that threats of school

closure often give rise to strong feelings. It noted that where there is a school within a rural community, this is seen as synonymous with the area having a future, whilst access to a good school is an important factor which parents take into account when they are choosing a new area in which to live.

Community finance, small school survival and the consequences of closure. The little booklet, *The school in the centre of the village* (Glesbygdsverket 1997), provides six case studies of small schools in communities and presents key factors which necessarily should be discussed before a decision is taken about closure. A major question is posed: is it possible to combine two goals, namely, maintaining a living countryside whilst keeping the community budget in balance? The booklet also points out the vulnerability of the very small schools. For instance, it can be hard to get specialist teachers for practical-aesthetic subjects.

In the rural areas, there seems to be a general opinion among the inhabitants that small village schools provide valuable environments for the children. This is very obvious in the strong engagement which takes place almost every time a school is threatened with closure. Often, you can see bitter opposition to the views of the local politicians. And at the centre of the debate lies the critical question of whether the small school is more expensive than the big one. In strictly financial terms, the straight answer is Yes, but occasionally there will be one among the politicians who will observe, "The little school costs more, but it is still worth keeping." When a community loses its small school, it is possible to measure some effects, but not all. What does it mean to a village if the school disappears? Some of the inhabitants work at the local school - what will happen to them? If the school closes down, what happens to the building, to the village shop, the post office, community activities and so on?

There are then, many questions to discuss and many factors to consider. The simple fact remains that school closure is a big threat to those who, like myself, live in a sparsely populated, rural area. What I am convinced about is that the small school is worth fighting for!

It is also necessary to point out that today, the economic crises are increasing, for it is not only rural schools that are being closed down as the following figures show:

| <u>Number of closures (2002)</u> | | <u>Number of closures (2003)</u> |
|----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Populated urban areas: | 0 | 32 |
| Populated rural areas: | 3 | 29 |
| Sparsely populated rural areas: | 5 | 9* |

*This figure would have been higher if the parents had not exercised their right to take over their school.

Sven Sundin, of the National Agency for Education has stated that 1000 schools need to

be closed within ten years. In 220 communities, will the number of pupils aged between from 6 to 13 years be reduced by more than 20% by 2007? This prognosis has not taken into consideration the inward or outward migration affecting the communities.

3. THE FUTURE

Although the present position is one in which the continued existence of small schools within rural communities looks more and more uncertain, there is one solution to the problem which is increasingly apparent, namely, that parents establish so-called "free schools" with direct state level funding. Generally, the conditions for being accepted for free school status from the National Agency for Education (Skolverket) have been liberalised in recent years. To become a free school, there has to be an enrolment of at least twenty pupils, the school has to be open to all, and the applicants have to base their application on the national school law and curriculum, and the nationally stated goals and values. In my part of the country, where sixteen schools are at risk, with rolls of forty or fewer anticipated in the coming year (2003/04), we will have so-called 'free schools' in eight small villages. No national statistics are available.

Also, it is important to note the current trend for families to look for a place to live outside the big cities. One reason for so doing is the availability of cheaper housing, but beyond that, is the desire for a quieter, more natural environment, in which the children can grow and develop. And the school is an important part of this.

The use of the Internet has already shown its value as a knowledge tool in remote areas for pupils and teachers alike, and it is possible to suggest that at present, we are only at the beginning of developing the technique. Networks are growing slowly and open a new world of possibilities in the search for knowledge and the development of wider cooperation.

If the rural school is to survive, it must be seen as more than the local primary school: it must also be developed into a resource for the whole community - a village meeting place, a common library, a hub for learning, a place of development for all ages. Jan Cedevärn said at the 2003 Interskola meeting, "To be able to survive, I consider that the village school must develop into the 'school in the centre of the village', not only physically but also **in people's consciousness**, by being a resource for learning and an access to information for all."

Acquiring ideas and stimulation from others, both at home and abroad, is an important part of creating scope for development and new ways of thinking. Interskola is a good example of an international network, going on year after year and holding a common concern for education in sparsely populated areas.

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Ni kan gärna hänvisa till Skolverkets eller Myndigheten för Skolutvecklings hemsidor. Där finns bra information även på engelska

(Information about Swedish schools is to be found at [www.myndigheten för skolutveckling](http://www.myndigheten.för.skolutveckling) and at www.skolverket.se. Both are available in English.)

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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS: AN IRISH PERSPECTIVE

Catherine Mulryan-Kyne

1. THE PAST

Historically, small one and two-teacher schools have been very much a feature of primary school education in the Republic of Ireland. At the foundation of the National Education system in 1831 it was accepted that, owing to the distribution of the population, and the control of the Church (both Protestant and Catholic) small schools would predominate in the system. A proliferation of small national schools under the control of their respective religious denominations resulted from negotiations between the Board of Education and the Church (both Protestant and Catholic) in the early life of the National system. In addition the insistence of the Catholic hierarchy that national schools be single gender rather than mixed gender resulted in one- and two-teacher schools in situations in which larger schools would have been more viable. The Free State government in 1922 inherited the national school structures set in place by the Board of Education.

Problems relating to the over-focusing on the revival of the Irish language to the neglect of the English language and other subjects on the curriculum, and the very poor physical conditions of many of the nation's schools were highlighted by various bodies in the 1950s, including the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). The government was very slow to address these problems. An OECD report, *Investment in Education* (1966), drew attention to the very poor state of a high proportion of national schools in the country. More importantly, it challenged the feasibility of having such a high proportion of one- and two-teacher schools, given the relatively high per pupil cost of these schools and their perceived deficiencies in relation to resources and educational outcomes. From the mid-60's onwards, forced closure and amalgamation of small one- and two-teacher schools occurred and became an issue of public debate and controversy. The decline of many rural communities was blamed on these closures and amalgamations. Increasing urbanisation and declining birth rate also contributed to the closure of many small schools.

In 1991 the OECD examiners acknowledged the importance of small rural schools in rural regeneration. However, they encouraged amalgamations aimed at having schools with no fewer than four teachers. This was supported in a subsequent government Green Paper but it gave rise to considerable debate at the National Education Convention in 1994. The report of the convention acknowledged the inevitability of rationalisation but advised that it be done in a planned and coherent manner (Coolahan, 1994). It drew attention to the important role of many small schools in isolated rural communities and it emphasized that "educational quality and not school size per se" should be the "main criterion" for rationalisation. This perspective has been reflected in recent government policy in this area in the past ten years.

2. THE PRESENT

The place of small rural schools in the primary education system. A total of 424,707 children were enrolled in Irish primary schools for the 2001-2002 school year. Almost 99% of these children were in state-funded schools, which are termed “national” schools. The remaining pupils attended private primary schools. In Ireland, there were 3161 national schools in the 2001-2002 school year. Over 14% of these national schools had classes designated for special needs pupils. An additional 121 special national schools catered exclusively for special needs pupils. There are eight grade levels in the primary school programme in Ireland. Although the statutory age for school entry is six, over 50% of children enter school at age four and almost 100% are in school by the age of 5.

Small schools, in which classes with two or more grade levels are taught in the same room by one teacher (i.e., multi-grade classes), are very much a feature of the Irish primary school system. Most of these schools are in rural areas. More than 42% of primary school teachers in Ireland work in small schools and 49% of primary school pupils are taught in these schools (DES, 2003). There are more 2 and 3 teacher schools in Ireland than in any other category.

Financing of small rural schools. No differentiation is made in the allocation of resources to small and larger schools. A *capitation* grant, or a grant based on the number of pupils enrolled in the school, is made by the government to all national schools and monies are also available for secretarial and care taking staff and for school improvement and maintenance. No school receives a capitation grant based on fewer than sixty pupils, resulting in all one-teacher and most two- teacher schools receiving a higher grant than would be justified by their pupil intake. Free transportation to and from school is available to pupils who live more than 2 miles away from the nearest school. This two-mile threshold does not apply in the case of pupils from schools that have been closed or amalgamated.

Appointment and retention of teachers in small rural schools. Strict guidelines exist in Ireland in relation to teacher numbers in schools. According to Irish government regulations (DES, 2004) schools with an intake of up to 12 pupils are entitled to one teacher. Schools with a pupil intake of over 12 and under 50 pupils are entitled to two teachers, schools with over 50 but under 82 pupils are entitled to three teachers, and schools with more than 82 pupils and fewer than 116 pupils are entitled to four teachers. The pattern continues with a designated number of additional pupils necessary to justify each extra teacher. Only pupils who are validly enrolled on 30th September of the school year in question may be taken into account for the purpose of determining staff numbers.

Teachers are expected to teach the full range of primary school subjects. Specialist “learning support” teachers are available to provide support for pupils with learning difficulties. In the case of small schools, these teachers are shared by a number of schools. In schools with fewer than 180 pupils (and fewer than 8 teachers), the school principal is also a class teacher. In schools with more than 180 pupils the principal is an “administrative” principal and does not have responsibility for a class. Seventy-five percent of primary schools have fewer than 180 pupils resulting in the majority of school

principals at primary level having teaching responsibilities. School principals in schools with six or fewer teachers are given 14 to 22 days' paid substitution for administrative work. That is, they are relieved from their teaching duties and a supply teacher is provided.

Teacher Training. Primary teachers are trained for three years in a College of Education, which is affiliated to or part of the University system and they are awarded a B.Ed degree. A Post-Graduate Diploma in Primary Teaching is awarded to students, who already hold an undergraduate degree, following an eighteen-month course in a College of Education. No specific courses in multi-grade teaching are offered in Colleges of Education. However, multi-grade teaching is dealt with as part of general methodology and curriculum courses in most cases. Some trainee teachers have an opportunity to work in small schools during their in-course teaching placement, but this is not a requirement and no specific policy exists in this regard.

Many teachers in small schools have been critical of in-service provision, especially in relation to the Revised Curriculum for Primary Schools, which is being phased in over a number of years. Recently, some steps have been taken to cater for their needs by bringing the staff of several small schools together for this in-service work. No differentiation is made in the curriculum statements and teaching guidelines that have accompanied the revised curriculum between small and large schools and single-grade and multi-grade classes. Textbooks also remain grade-based with individual texts for each grade level.

Pupil achievement in small rural schools. There is little information available about pupil outcomes in multi-grade and single-grade classes in the Irish context. That which is available provides findings consistent with the international research, which shows that there are no significant differences in academic performance between pupils in single-grade and multi-grade classes. Martin and Kellaghan (1977) examined the relationship between school variables and reading attainment (in Irish and English) in grades 3 and 5 in a national sample of Irish primary schools. They concluded that school size did not play a significant role in determining attainment in either English or Irish.

The 1999 National Assessment of Mathematics Achievement (Shiel & Kelly, 1999), which focused on the mathematics of fourth-grade children (age 9-10) in the Republic of Ireland, found no significant differences between the achievement of pupils in single-grade and multi-grade classes in small schools. Given that Irish children do at least as well in international comparisons as countries with similar levels of economic development, teachers in small schools can be satisfied that they are doing a good job.

Contemporary issues and problems in small rural schools. Irish multi-grade teachers are generally positive about teaching in multi-grade classes and most find teaching in this setting satisfying and fulfilling (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004). However, many teachers experience significant problems in trying to organise and manage their classes for teaching and learning and most teachers experience difficulties in trying to cater for all grade levels and for individual needs in the time available to them. Teachers consider that

multi-grade teaching requires more organisation and management than single-grade teaching and resources and support are considered to be inadequate by many. Teachers who were also school principals felt that the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms was compromised and that children are losing out due to the dual role of administration and teaching (IPPN, 2003). Official policy statements do not distinguish between teaching principals and administrative (i.e., non-teaching) principals (Ireland, 1995). Isolation is another issue often raised by teachers in small rural schools. They are often quite distant from Education Centres, and "inter schools' sports competitions and other school-related cultural and social activities" are difficult to organise (INTO, 1994a).

Many teachers hold the view that small school schools in Ireland suffer from serious neglect at official level. A report on educational disadvantage by the INTO (1994b) showed that small schools in rural areas received a lower level of service than larger schools. They had less access to learning support and psychological services than larger schools and poorer library facilities and resources generally. The fact that funding is based on the number of pupils in the school means that small schools are not in a position to provide the kinds of resources and facilities available in larger schools. Recently considerable media attention has been given to issues relating to the condition of many small schools around the country. Improvements in this area have been promised and a programme of school infrastructure improvement is now in operation.

Support for small rural schools. In 1995 a government White Paper (Ireland, 1995) suggested that "networks" be developed to improve the conditions of teaching principals in small schools and their pupils and staffs. The HayGroup report on the primary school principalship in Ireland (Drea, E., & O'Brien, 2001) recommended that "alternative structures" in small school management be explored to increase their effectiveness. The recent National Progress Report of the School Development Planning Initiative (2002) recommended that active consideration be given to promoting clustering of small rural schools.

In recent times some efforts have been made to develop such networks and/or clustering arrangements. The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), officially launched by the Minister for Education and Science in 2000, was intended to "foster nationally a culture of professional support and development for Primary Principals." The organisation of county networks by IPPN for principals and deputy principals has been a very significant development in addressing the needs of principals in small schools. In 2003 a project on the Future of Small Schools and the Teaching Principalship was initiated. This project, which is ongoing, involves a partnership between the IPPN and a team from St. Patrick's College of Education in Dublin. One aspect of the project will be the piloting of clustering/networking arrangements among a sample of small rural schools. Some moves towards clustering have already been made in the context of in-service provision for the revised primary curriculum. This has convinced many teachers of the value of formal and informal networking in the context of their work.

3. THE FUTURE

Birth rates in Ireland have fluctuated over the past 10 years, with a decline from 1980 to 1994 but a slight increase since 1995. It is predicted that rates will plane out and decrease in the next few years. Declines in birth rates affects school enrolments and the impact tends to be especially strong in rural areas. This is particularly significant for small rural schools.

It is likely that in the future some small schools will close. Most will survive and more may be opened where the need can be justified. If the thousands of pupils that attend small rural schools, and the teachers who teach in them, are to be adequately provided for, policy makers need to recognise the problems that are presently being experienced in these schools and respond with coherent policies that alleviate them. Small rural schools have an important part to play in the fabric of the life of small communities. Also, with increasing diversity in the Irish population, small schools are likely to become an important feature of urban areas. These facts need to be acknowledged in policy-making in this area.

The issue of professional isolation of principals and teachers in small rural schools is an area that needs to be addressed. Contact and interaction with fellow professionals in the context of one's work is an important form of continuing professional development. The need for more adequate training and support for school principals and the creation of "networks", to support professional development and reduce isolation, has been recognised in recent government policy statements (Ireland, 1995). Concerted effort is needed to implement these policies, including the support of already-existing initiatives (e.g., the IPPN project). More research is needed to examine the problems being encountered by teachers in small schools and the realities of classroom life in such schools. Social and community factors should also figure in research studies in this area.

There has been a worrying reduction in the level of interest among primary teachers in applying for vacant principal posts, particularly in small schools (Drea, E., & O'Brien, 2001; IPPN, 2003). This makes it all the more urgent the need to deal with the difficulties currently being experienced by teachers and principals in small schools and to provide supports that increase the attractiveness of the role of principal in these schools.

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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS: A FINNISH PERSPECTIVE

Uljas Syväniemi

1. THE PAST

During half a century, the circumstances of rural primary education in Finland have seen great changes. During the parallel school system, it was the best pupils who left the village school to go to a secondary school either in the municipal centre, or in a town further from home. When the secondary school saw a great expansion in the 1960s, a growing proportion of an age group left the primary school after four years.

The comprehensive school reform was implemented in the 1970s. It meant a new curriculum, teaching of foreign languages, special education and other advances. It meant equal opportunities of education for the nine years of compulsory education. It also meant staying close to home for six years.

Then came the decentralization of administration. The school law reforms in 1985, 1991 and 1998 changed the situation dramatically. As a result of a long process, a transfer of power from state authorities to the municipalities was implemented. The responsibility for providing comprehensive education now lies with the municipality. Within the municipality, the municipal council now has the right to transfer decision-making powers to the school board, the boards of governors, or even to members of the administrative staff, including heads of school. On the one hand it meant flexibility; on the other hand it meant that schools have lost a moderating protector with a wider interest in mind.

The economic depression of the 1990s proved the point. Without protecting regulations, rural primary schools went through a restructuring of the school network, the equalization of class sizes, the internalization of staff development and many other cost-saving measures with nice names.

2. THE PRESENT

Policy and forms of decision-making. So far as the retention or closure of small rural primary schools is concerned, policy and decision-making reside at the local level. The municipal council issues regulations for administration, including the sharing of decision-making powers. Some municipalities go further than others. Some municipalities give a minimum number of pupils as a guide-line for the board of education, but the decision on closing a school is made by the municipal council. Money often dictates the decision. The state financial support covers about 50 % of the costs, on an average, but the state authorities do not interfere with local policies.

Forms of professional support for small rural primary schools. These vary from one municipality to another. During the years of economic depression, many municipalities dropped all in-service training. The situation is slowly improving now. In the late 1980s, the state authorities ceased to help with in-service training. Now, the state provincial offices are again providing free in-service training days and they also employ a

corps of part-time teacher-counsellors. This especially benefits small rural schools with small budgets. The state provincial offices also encourage schools to make use of inter-school cooperation in many ways.

Administrative and para-professional help. Like professional support, both administrative and para-professional help constitute a local matter. Usually very little of either is provided. Where the heads of school have been given more power, they may have also been given secretarial help. Help for the teaching staff is usually associated with the special needs of the children. Given the integration of more and more pupils with special needs in small schools, the teachers may also be given helpers who are not qualified teachers.

Class size and staffing. There are no regulations on the size and staffing of multi-grade classes in general education. Only special education classes are still protected by regulations which stipulate the maximum numbers of pupils. Getting help for special education pupils usually requires a favourable report from a doctor.

Pupil achievement. The attainments of pupils in small rural primary schools is as good as that in large schools, whilst as a place for social learning the small school can be better than the large institution. There is evidence for this in research. However, the lack of qualified teaching staff may have an effect on pupil achievement.

Present Problems. Small rural primary schools face two main problems: lack of pupils and lack of qualified teachers. Decision-makers look at how much the school costs per pupil. They do not know that no decree exists demanding that the school be cheap. They do not appear to know that education takes money. The smaller a school, the more euros per pupil it consumes. Their simple solution is to close a school. Such a policy is not always wise. Another problem is the shortage of qualified teachers. Where teachers are able to select from amongst several opportunities, it is understandable if they choose a post in a large, rather than a small, community.

3. THE FUTURE

The state should quickly increase teacher education in universities, to save small rural schools from bigger problems. That message has already gone to the Ministry of Education. Unfortunately, it needs several years for such a change to take effect in schools. But the lack of pupils is a more difficult problem and it goes hand in hand with the migration from the countryside into the town. That again is connected with the lack of jobs. But the situation is not hopeless. There are municipalities that have succeeded in creating jobs and receiving families with school-age children. Schools are for children, and schools are a community asset when it comes to gaining new inhabitants.

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RURAL SCHOOLS: AN ENGLISH PERSPECTIVE

Tony Rule

Introduction: Small Schools as part of the English Education System in the Twentieth Century.

From the inception of state education in 1870 to the implementation of the 1944 Education Act, the mass of English children aged 5 to 14 were educated within an elementary tradition, composed of three stages: infant (5-7), junior (7-11) and senior (11-14). Education in the countryside was generally provided in 'all through' (5-14) schools with multi-graded classes. From around 1902 onwards, fee-paying state grammar schools appeared with some free scholarship access. The 1944 Education Act did away with the elementary school system and replaced it with a primary stage, (5-11) usually organised into infant schools (5-7) and junior schools (7-11), and a secondary stage consisting of selective grammar schools (11-16/18) and secondary modern schools (11-15). Small rural schools lost their senior pupils and some consequently closed, while the survivors, commonly staffed with two or three teachers, and known morbidly as 'decapitated schools' became multi-graded primary schools.

In 1967, two major reports (Plowden (England)) and Gittins (Wales))¹ found much to commend in small rural schools. Against that, both the Plowden and Gittins Committees were attracted by the notion of large primary schools, powerfully resourced and employing semi-specialist pedagogy. With respect to small multi-graded village schools, they expressed reservations about professional isolation, the limited size of pupil peer groups and the problem of small staffs delivering a modern curriculum. Such reasoning was seized upon by those county authorities anxious to close small schools. In the late Sixties, the comprehensivisation of secondary schooling got under way.

1985 saw the publication of a government report, *Better Schools*¹, which provided a Thatcherite perspective on the way forward for primary schools - curriculum led staffing. A nine subject curriculum was identified, the teaching of each subject to be overseen by a specialist teacher. Such a principle in itself defined the minimum size of the effective school - nine teachers. The report observed, "...it is inherently difficult for a very small school to be educationally satisfactory." (para 275). That stark assessment offered further comfort to those anxious to close or amalgamate village schools. Surprisingly, the same government, which had made clear its hostility to such institutions, offered funding via Education Support Grants (ESG) for five-year initiatives to explore ways of providing support for small schools. These initiatives explored a variety of federating and clustering strategies.²

¹ Plowden Report, CACE (1967), *Children and Their Schools*, HMSO. Gittins Report, CACE (Wales), (1967) *Primary Education in Wales*, HMSO.

² The general debate regarding rural schools during this period has been well documented - four publications of note are *The Small Rural Primary School: a matter of quality*, Bell, A. & Sigsworth. A., Falmer Press 1987, *Aspects of Education No44*, - 'Small Primary Schools', (Ed.) Waugh, D., University of Hull 1991, *The Future of Small Schools*, The National Society (C of E) 1991. (This contains a useful Checklist for Action by Governors, *Small Rural Primary Schools: Options for the Future*, Keast, D.J. University of Exeter Small Schools Network 1992, (a post ERA look at the funding issues facing small

Two further additions to the educational scene emerged as the century neared its end. One was the introduction of Standardised Achievement Tests for seven, eleven and fourteen year old pupils and the other was the amplification of school inspections. The results from both were unequivocal. - small schools could hold their own. In 1995, a government White Paper, *Rural England* acknowledged that rural schools contribute to the quality of rural life, are valued for the focus and balance they provide in their communities and for the sense of security they provide to the children. The paper further observed:

*In the past, there has tended to be a belief that small school could not provide as good an education as their larger counterparts. Early findings from the first year of the Office for Standards in Education [the new school inspection system] do not support this view.*³

The United Kingdom Government had, therefore, finally acknowledged that small village schools could hold their own educationally and contribute to rural life. That is not to say that the ‘big is beautiful’ philosophy had been abandoned. Small schools cost more to run than large schools and the accountant is king in present-day England. The closure rate slowed, but it did not cease.

With that general overview in place, we turn to a specific area of England - Cornwall. This county is situated in the most south-westerly part of England. Bounded on north, south and west by the sea and with a spine of high granite moors running its length, it is an area of great beauty and also isolation. It is currently classified as one of the poorest regions of the European Union and qualifies for Category One funding.

A Cornish Perspective of the Small Rural School within the English system

1. THE PAST (1951-2000)

Historically, the Local Education Authority (LEA) of Cornwall has been rather ambivalent when it has come to establishing an LEA-wide policy regarding (the closure of) small schools. Whilst the majority of elected County Councillors have often supported the notion of “rationalisation”, they suddenly become implacably opposed when the closure or amalgamation of a school or schools is proposed in their own area! Suddenly, all of the benefits of retaining a small school within a community come to the fore. Across the period in question, this ambivalence in the matter of retention and closure posed problems for the LEA in how to render practical support to small schools, in order to address the kind of limitations and weaknesses which the Plowden and Gittins Committees alleged that such schools had.

Against this background, a group of headteachers from small schools, who were attending an INSET course at Fowey Hall in 1983, prepared a paper, “*Rural Education in Cornwall – a Positive Approach*”. This was presented to the Chief Education Officer when he attended the plenary session. The LEA set up a working party to look into the

schools, citing Cornwall, Cumbria, Devon, Dorset, Lincolnshire).

³ HMSO (1995), Government White Paper: *Rural England*, HMSO.

proposals and this led very quickly to the formation of the Cornwall Small Schools' Project, which invited clusters of small schools to apply for support for joint initiatives. These clusters ranged in size from 2 to 8 schools. They were allocated some limited funding from the LEA and the head teacher of one of the small schools was seconded to Exeter University School of Education to study for a research degree as a way of monitoring aspects of the project's progress. This was funded from the Department of Education and Science Pool until it dried up in March 1987. An initial application for Education Support Grant funding (already mentioned above) was refused on the grounds that Cornwall "already had a project up and running" and therefore did not need support! Following heavy lobbying an Education Support Grant was awarded for four years and this enabled a larger number of clusters to be created. Some funding was allocated to support individual, very isolated schools and this was operated via the Advisory Service. An experienced teacher was redeployed to act as a liaison for schools within the project, but she was not replaced when she retired, the role being absorbed by a Primary Adviser. The "grass roots" nature of Cornwall's project ensured its continuation beyond the point when the Education Support Grant ended, as by this time school governors had seen the value of cooperation between schools and were willing to make some allocation from within their own school budgets. The LEA also maintained their support, albeit at a reduced level (currently £300 per school).

2. THE PRESENT

The following features characterise the contemporary scene for small rural schools and their staffs:

Financial support. The main financial support for small schools now comes via the LEA formula, a very complicated system for dividing the central government apportionment between schools. This changed in 2000. The Standards Fund Grant has now been discontinued - an example of how this previously helped was that of enabling an increase in secretarial time, which freed head teachers of certain administrative tasks. Schools in clusters now receive £300 per school per annum, specifically to support joint activities between schools. Clearly, with coach hire at around £100 a day, such a small sum does not go far. Although the bidding process to the LEA for funding has been discontinued, schools must submit a detailed account of exactly how the money has been spent.

Administrative and para-professional help. The only provision of administrative and para-professional help for small rural primary schools is that which can be achieved by drawing funding from the school's own budget.

Regulations governing multi-grade classes and special needs provision. There are no regulations relating to the size and staffing of multi-grade classes and special needs provision, apart from central government regulations regarding class sizes in Reception/ Early Years, and Key Stage 1 classes (i.e. no class in ages 5 - 7 years must be over 30 in number). Nationally, upper primary class sizes are rising and currently, around 20% of pupils aged between 7 - 11 are being taught in classes of 30 plus. This figure is likely to worsen. From September 2005, new regulations will entitle all primary teachers to be free of classroom duties for 10% of their working week for marking, preparation and

administration purposes. The situation regarding the shortage of funds to employ supply ('stand-in') teachers to enable the class teachers to have 10% release time is so acute in some areas, that some head teachers are considering the possibility of closing their schools at lunchtime on Fridays. Given school budget limitations, the most likely effect is that class sizes will increase. The problem of complying with the regulation will be particularly acute in small rural schools. Special needs provision, which is reviewed annually, is related to the individual's statement of need, but not to the size of the school.

Pupil achievement in small rural primary schools. Two of the claimed disadvantages of small schools which were always advanced when a small school closure was planned were first, that pupil achievements were lower than those in larger schools and second, that it was inherently difficult for two or three teachers to deliver a curriculum of breadth and quality - this despite the absence of empirical evidence. Following the establishment of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the use of Standard Achievement Tests with children aged seven and eleven, two things have become apparent. Small schools emerge with credit from Inspectorial reports whilst their pupils' test achievements are at least equal to those yielded by large schools.⁴ The Government recognises outstanding school quality and performance by awarding Beacon Status to schools that meet the criteria. In Cornwall, the Beacon schools are to be found amongst its small schools. This must leave central government with a collective red face, since a widely held belief prevailed that Ofsted inspections would show that small schools were unable to "deliver the National Curriculum effectively."

Contemporary issues and challenges facing small rural primary schools:

Pupil costs. That the per pupil cost of educating children in small schools is considerably higher than pupil costs in larger schools is beyond doubt and represents a major issue, especially to politicians who preside over national and county finances. The minimum 'economic school size' in England is held to be one with an enrolment between 120 and 150 pupils. Here is an illustrative example of a difference in funding: School A with 118 pupils on roll receives £1800 per pupil per annum, whilst School B with 20 pupils on roll receives £4500 per pupil per annum.

Parental perceptions of schooling. Given that there is a real option of choosing between schools and that the necessary mobility exists, the views which parents hold of schooling constitute a major factor influencing their decisions on whether to send their children to a large or a small school. For those parents who favour individual attention and a family atmosphere, the small school, because of its size and multi-grade system, is the preferred choice. Of course, where the success of a particular small school in these respects becomes well known, it can attract 'inward migration' with a resultant increase in class size, making multi-grade teaching much more difficult. As a consequence, the small school's prized qualities of individual attention, multi-grade classes and family atmosphere are reduced and eroded.

Teacher stress. Whatever the size of a school, present-day teachers are under greater

⁴ Information obtained from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) by the National Association for the Support of Small Schools (NASSS). See also Richards, C. *Education Journal*, Feb 1998.

pressure than formerly. In the small school, in addition to increased external demands on their time, such pressure is amplified by the intricacies of multi-grade teaching, particularly when mixed-age classes increase in size. Of course, stress of this kind can be offset by the satisfaction gained from working with individual children over a period of time longer than a year and from the sense of purpose and unity which comes from working in family groups across the school for specific projects (e.g. Book Weeks, Science Fairs, Arts Workshops, Drama Productions).

Job-sharing. The practice of two part-time teachers sharing responsibility for a class, for example one teacher in the morning and the other in the afternoon, has become more widespread within small schools in recent years. This has the effects of increasing available teacher subject expertise, reducing individual teacher workloads in classes organised in this way, and creating a wider forum of debate for professional development within the school. It gives good value for money.

Informal support. Parental and community support continues to be strong. This is to be seen particularly in pre-school and post school activities and clubs, help in the classroom and fund raising.

Implementing regulations. Central Government regulations, especially those relating to Health and Safety, Child Protection and Equal Opportunities, whilst necessary in themselves, continue to place an increasing burden upon teachers. The biggest burden here is possibly the ever-changing nature of these regulations. Whilst teachers work hard to keep up with all the required changes, they are inevitably concerned that there might be aspects that they have missed and which could result in problems for them during an Ofsted school inspection.

Professional Support and Development. When engaged in general discussion of small rural schools in an international context, it is all too easy to think of them as being in similar settings and to slip into the assumption that they are all much of a muchness. In terms of climate, access and distance between settlements, for example, rural areas in England are not the same as rural areas in, say, Iceland and Arctic Norway. By and large, the English climate is relatively benign, whilst the schools constituting a cluster in England are, commonly, quite close to one another, often less than thirty minutes' drive apart. Such proximity means that cluster meetings and exchanges between schools are easier to achieve than in the more sparsely populated regions of other countries. Clustering is far and away the most popular approach to development and support in English rural primary schools. The summary which follows is drawn from the work of Joe Caudle, a Primary Adviser in Cornwall, who, in 2004, gathered information from the local education authorities of counties with substantial rural areas, and hence, substantial numbers of small village schools. He gained responses from the counties of Derbyshire, Devon, Dorset, Kent, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Northumberland, Nottinghamshire, Shropshire, South Gloucestershire, Staffordshire and Surrey. What follows is a digest of the information which he received.

In the 1980s, as we noted earlier, the national Conservative Government, despite its

marked hostility to the retention of small school, provided grants for which local authorities could bid, in order to explore ways of supporting small schools. Although the LEA proposals varied in form and structure, their core concept was that of groups of schools forming cooperative clusters. When the government grants ceased, some counties allowed their clusters to wither away, whilst others continued to support them. It is evident from Caudle's inquiries that, stimulated by recent funding, the practice of clustering is presently alive and well and, as one respondent put it, "The future lies in clusters. Clusters can creatively solve issues by grouping together." Clusters, of course, vary in size, depending upon school affinities, interests, proximity and ease of access. In Cornwall, 135 schools are organised in clusters varying in size from 2 to 9 schools.

Among the claims made for them in the survey responses are: the enhanced capacity to purchase specialist expertise and to draw on the expertise contained within the cluster; joint planning possibilities, improvement in management strategies, the widening of pupil peer contact, improved financial efficiency achieved through economies of scale, the broadening of curriculum through cooperation and the widening of professional discussion. In one LEA, head teacher consultants offer support to small school staffs, whilst in other local education authorities there are advisers whose roles are dedicated, in whole or part, to rural school support.

Several counties, following the example of Dorset, are interested in the notion of school federation, whereby two or three proximate small schools are organised and led by one head teacher.

The establishment of clusters greatly amplifies the opportunities for face-to-face professional discussion among teachers in small schools. The now taken for granted existence of the internet has provided a further dimension through which, by setting up websites, local education authorities, clusters and individual schools are able to announce their presence, talk to each other and transmit information. Among the uses cited for such websites are advice on curriculum planning, the description of cluster initiatives and the presentation of quickly assimilable material for heads, governors and teachers, e.g. via summaries of documents and digests of reports. This is seen as especially valuable for small school heads with teaching commitments.

The cluster groups in several counties publish occasional newsletters to disseminate information on their activities. For example, one edition of the 'Devon Small Schools' Newsletter' reports details of community education courses in ICT for parents and children supported by EC funding. In another county, the local education authority has recognised the tyranny of the computer screen and duplicates information by post, so that heads can choose convenient times for necessary reading.

Whilst regular meetings of cluster groups give their members opportunities to meet, plan and discuss matters of mutual interest, it is also evident that an annual conference, usually of the one day variety, but sometimes residential, is now an established feature of clustering, allowing individual cluster groups to come together and to concentrate upon a common topic or theme, e.g. using the environment, developing design and technology.

Clusters in one county have established video-conferencing facilities.

When clusters are well-established, it is not uncommon for them to develop materials which take account of the locality or the small school context. This is exemplified in one cluster group by a booklet, complete with case studies, which deals with the teaching of literacy in mixed-age classes. Elsewhere, a similar, mixed-age numeracy planning document is being prepared.

Small schools and their viability. As we noted earlier, through the late 1960s to the 1980s, when the closure of small village schools was at its height, county councils founded their small school closure proposals on alleged educational failings - inadequate curriculum coverage, teacher isolation, etc. Economic reasons were but whispered. As the 'official' reasons for closure became increasingly threadbare in the light of evidence and community opposition became more sophisticated, county councils began to take casualties and their appetites for closure diminished considerably.⁵

Small schools and surplus pupil places. In 1998, the recently-elected Labour government let it be known that there would be no automatic presumption of closure, except in extreme circumstances. Further, the Department of Education and Skills issued a number of suggestions (mostly drawn from grassroots initiatives) for small schools to take up. This reinforced the view that a more positive political attitude was developing towards small schools and their retention. However, a new slogan, "Best Value" appeared in the political rhetoric. The National Audit Commission, which is described as "an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is used economically, efficiently and effectively" entered the educational scene. Two major preoccupations of the Commission, clearly related to "Best Value", can be illustrated from its scrutiny of an English county:

1. The first preoccupation is not unlike that constant anxiety of theatre managers - the matter of empty seats or, in Audit Commission terms, surplus school places. Ideally, surplus school places should not exceed the Commission's target figure of 5%. In the county in question, 10.65% of primary school places and 9.65% of secondary places are surplus. Much of this surplus is to be found in its small schools.
2. The second preoccupation is to do with school reviews. The county has 111 schools with fewer than 90 pupils (the Audit Commission's definition of a small school). In the matter of small school review, although the county has an established policy of reviewing small schools if their pupil enrolment falls below 50 (of which there are 37), it has not been implemented during the last four years.

Formerly, the grounds for the closure of a small school gave explicit priority to educational inadequacies and left economic concerns implicit. The Audit Commission's order of priorities is evident in its observation that "value for money, effective education, and social opportunities for young people [will not be achieved] without constantly

⁵ In one county council, the chairperson of the education committee was ousted at the next election after an acrimonious battle to close the local village school.

reviewing schools with declining numbers”.⁶

School Reviews. We are very grateful to the School Organisation Review Primary Schools Strategy Group of Cornwall County Council for allowing us access to their recent thorough study which gives a picture of the proposed principles and procedures necessary for the adoption of “a strategic approach to future school organisation reviews and proposals.” The overall aim of the approach is “to recognise the demands of education in the 21st century with regard to curriculum, an ever-changing pupil population, demographic trends and best value.”

The review group indicates that its preferred means for delivering primary education is via “...all-through infant and junior schools [5-11years], offering continuity of primary provision, with an optimum one-form or two-form entry. *However, it is recognised that many schools will have to operate with mixed classes.*” (My italics) The necessary principles underpinning the provision of primary education, whether by an individual school or as part of a cluster or network are that they:

1. Meet the needs of pupils and other stakeholders.
2. Provide a high quality of education including that evidenced by pupil progress.
3. Offer every pupil an appropriate curriculum and educational experience.
4. Offer a standard of accommodation that is adequate, suitable, safe and that provides an appropriate learning environment.
5. Represent a fair and efficient use of the county’s resource.

Consideration of the reorganisation of a primary school will be triggered if one of the following circumstances arise:

1. Notification that a head teacher plans to leave a school.
2. Difficulty in appointing a head teacher or appropriately qualified teaching staff.
3. Numbers on roll are likely to decline to a level which would result in there being only one class.
4. Poor educational standards are not remedied by training, advice and support.
5. Surplus places within a school reach, or seem likely to reach, 25% or more.
6. Increasing pupil numbers within an area as a whole require a review of school provision in that area.

If the consequent review concludes that change is necessary to effect improvement in educational provision, then the following options will be considered:

1. Partnership arrangements.⁷
2. Federation⁸

⁶ 2005 Audit Commission Draft Report: *Review of Pupil Place Planning.*

⁷ Partnership: Formal and informal clustering arrangements, including management ,partnership and school networking.

3. Amalgamation.⁹
4. Closure

Whilst it is clear that the economics of schooling is a preoccupation of the Audit Commission, and whilst the small rural primary school, as ever, remains vulnerable to the vagaries of small scale which can give grounds for closure, it is also possible to see that former grassroots initiatives, now accepted as approved practice, provide some collective defensive strength.

3. THE FUTURE

Amalgamation. In the past, it has been commonplace, when a school roll falls below a viable number, to close the school and bus the children to the nearest large school - often in town. An alternative to a rural area losing the presence of its school, where two communities agree, can be that of amalgamation, especially when that amalgamation brings with it a new school building. This has been successfully achieved in some parts of Cornwall and could inform future strategy.

Federation. The organisation of several very small schools under one head teacher as a means to allow communities to retain their school is a positive alternative to closure. A central issue if such a strategy is to be employed in the future is the location of the administrative base and the location of the head teacher. Present experience indicates that parents can form the impression that the school where the head teacher has made his/her base must be the “best” school in the group, with the consequence that a drift towards that school can begin, to the detriment of the other schools. Further, there is also the question of who will be in charge of individual schools when the Federation Head is at one of the others in the group? Evidence of good practice in this respect is to be seen in Holland, where the head teacher rotates on a fortnightly basis between all schools in the federation.

Rural Housing. The availability of reasonably priced housing has become a major issue in Cornwall. The influx of second home owners into Cornwall has pushed the price of houses completely beyond the reach of most young couples, thus driving them, and their children, out of the villages and into the towns. The result is that school rolls are falling in rural areas, and many town schools are full to capacity. A further consequence is that falling rolls create a sense of uncertainty for a small school and a downward spiral can begin. The support of parents will become even more vital should numbers continue to fall, with the possibility of closure increasing. All of these matters constitute a major political issue in a number of other areas as well as in Cornwall, although the greatest increases in property prices are to be seen in Cornwall.

Clustering. The bringing together of groups of small rural schools in clusters can continue to provide INSET support for staff in a way which is relevant to their common

⁸ Federation. Either (a) the creation of a single or joint governing body covering two or more schools or (b), a group of schools with a formal agreement to work together. This will involve, .g. structural changes in leadership, management and governance. (Department for Education and Skills definitions.)

⁹ The merging of two schools to form one.

needs and can enable activities, such as residential visits, which would be beyond the scope of an individual small school. Where determination of priorities and activities is in the hands of the teaching staffs within a school cluster, as it is in Cornwall, the sense of ownership is a very positive aspect.

Rural School Staffing. Over the past three decades, Conservative and Labour Governments successively have used the educational arena to demonstrate their political virility. This has been most evident in constant political intervention in the functioning of schools, manifest in the increased inspection of schools, the national testing of children, a steady flow of government initiatives accompanied by a flood of documents and heavy demands for school statistics and reports. Given that the volume of initiatives (many of them short-lived) and excessive administrative demands are the same for both large and small schools, the head teachers of small schools carry the same burdens, but with much less professional and administrative support. It is not, therefore, surprising that difficulties in the recruitment and retention of heads and of teachers of small schools are being encountered and will increase. This problem cannot wait upon the future.

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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS: A NORWEGIAN PERSPECTIVE

Karl Jan Solstad

1. THE PAST

The origins of popular education in rural Norway may be traced back to the 1739 Act on Schools of Rural Norway, which stated that the parish school should cater for all children between 7 and 12 years of age and that the schoolholder should "...teach all the children in the catchment area defined for his school, poor and rich". Thus the early history of Norwegian primary education is also mainly a history of rural education. As late as 1900, around 80 per cent of the Norwegian population lived in sparsely populated areas (i.e. in locations with less than 200 people). Today, the comparable figures for sparsely populated areas versus villages/towns/cities are almost exactly the other way round - 20 and 80 per cent respectively. These demographic changes have occurred over a long period of time, but at an accelerating pace during the last 50 years.

Until 1959, the provision of primary, compulsory education was regulated by two distinctively different education acts, one for rural municipalities and one for urban ones. Accordingly, there were also two versions of the national curriculum. The main differences between rural and urban primary education were related to schooling time (annual teaching time in rural schools was just about half of that of urban schools), class size (reduced maximum class size in rural schools depending on the number of age-groups in the class) and subject coverage (rural schools were exempted from English and home economics as compulsory subjects).

During the mid-1900s, single-grade classes became the norm in urban primary schools. This way of grouping school children in classes was almost axiomatically regarded as providing the best conditions for learning. Improved road conditions and the introduction of school buses in post-war years enabled school authorities to 'improve' rural education by a large-scale amalgamation of rural schools. Across the period 1950-70, the number of primary schools in rural municipalities was actually reduced to less than half of the 1950 number; all this as part of the struggle for, allegedly, more equal educational opportunities for rural and urban children.

Another development, also related to the idea of equalising educational opportunities, was the standardisation of curriculum content. To make the common compulsory seven year period of primary education acceptable for direct intake into secondary schooling (middle school/gymnasium), the content of primary education was heavily standardised to fit the demands of the most prestigious institution for further schooling, the grammar type secondary education, heavily based on urban middle class values.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the process of the geographical centralisation of compulsory schooling and the nationally standardised content of education came in for extensive criticism. School centralisation as a deliberate policy to improve rural education was

abandoned by about 1970 and the national curriculum opened up to admit local themes in 1974. The real breakthrough for locally-based content and learning materials came with the 1987 national curriculum guidelines which demanded that local curriculum plans be made by each school and which also introduced “practical, social and cultural work” as a compulsory activity throughout primary and lower secondary schooling. Within such a shift in thinking, the concept of the *community active school* was embraced by the guidelines. Clearly, such ideas on how a school ought to reflect upon, and function in, the local community, is hardly compatible with large schools in sparsely populated areas, the consequence of which is to leave most small villages or settlements without a school.

2. THE PRESENT

Policy and decision-making. Primary education is regulated by a national education act (*Opplæringslova 1998*) and a set of national curriculum guidelines (1997). A new national curriculum has just been finalised and will, provided it receives the approval of the Storting, be implemented as from autumn 2006. However, compulsory education, comprised of the primary stage (grades 1-7, age range 6-12) and the lower secondary stage (grades 8-10, age range 13-15), is actually run by individual local municipalities, of which Norway has 435. The number of people in each municipality varies from fewer than 300 to about 500,000 people (Oslo), the average being just above 10,000 people. According to a classification of municipalities along a peripheral-central dimension, about 650,000 people live in peripheral municipalities, that is municipalities which have no village/town of more than 5,000 people and where the travel time from the municipal centre to a larger town/city is more than 45 minutes. The typical population size of such peripheral municipalities is within the range of 1,000-3,000 people. Schools using multi-grade class organisation are, of course, particularly frequent in these small, peripheral municipalities, but are also to be found in the more populous, central municipalities. Thirty-five per cent of all primary schools have a multi-grade organisation, catering for 10-12 per cent of the primary school population.

From as early as 1837 the municipalities have had formal responsibility for running their primary schools. Since 1860 each diocese, later on each county, had a government-appointed director of education. Up to around 1990, the national level was not only able to maintain oversight of how the schools were actually run by the municipalities through these regional officers but, to a certain extent, also had the power to intervene in local decision-making. For instance, a municipality could not decide to close down a school, or to change the school structure within its borders, unless the people in the catchment area of the threatened school as well as the county Director of Education had been heard. In case of a majority decision of school closure being made by the municipal council, a minority of the council’s members might appeal directly to the Ministry of Education to reverse the majority decision. Until 1986, it was also the case that, depending on the annual approval by the Director of Education of the actual school structure, each municipality was granted earmarked money from the Ministry of Education to cover the cost of running their primary and lower secondary schools.

The introduction of a block grant system for transferring money from national to municipal level in 1986, changes in the School Act in 1988 and a new municipal act in

1992, effectively transferred power from national to municipal level, and the situation of the small multi-grade rural schools rapidly changed for the worse. Whereas the number of small multi-grade schools (that is schools having three classes or less) was almost unchanged nationally during the period 1978-88, ten years later, their number was reduced to around half.

Thus, paradoxically, this decentralisation of power from national to local, municipal level led to a drastic centralisation of rural schools. Most interestingly, this happened without any shift in national attitude or policy towards the small schools. The reasons for this development are as follows. When each municipality, because of the block grant system, had to bear the financial burden of running its primary and lower secondary schools, the municipal council was generally forced to look more closely at the running costs of its schools in order to meet pressing demands for spending within other sectors of municipal activities. It has been shown that the per pupil costs for running a two-class primary school in Norway are about twice that of running a school with seven or more classes (Rønning *et al.* 2003). Furthermore, over the past ten years, the variables favouring sparsely populated municipalities (long distances, small settlements) in the equation for calculating the amount of money to be transferred to each municipality have been given less weight, in relative terms, than variables favouring urban municipalities (especially in the area of social problems) (Berg 2004). Thus, the financial burdens of small, sparsely populated municipalities, which are, of course, also those in which small schools are most likely to be found, have worsened recently, compared to other types of municipalities. As seen by local policy makers, the closing down of small schools is often among the few options, if not the only one, left to them if they are to balance the municipal budget.

Professional support. In spite of the fact that small schools and multi-grade teaching have constituted a substantial part of the education provision in rural Norway (and continue to do so), the professional support particularly addressing the challenges of multi-grade teaching has been rather limited. Commenting on new trends in rural education around 1950, the period when the bussing of school children began, Martin Strømnes (1947, p.13) pointed out that one set of national curriculum guidelines followed the other without giving any advice relevant to schools employing multi-grade teaching. At best there was a mention that "... the teachers [in small schools] must adjust themes and methods to 'incomplete division of school classes' [that is classes including more than one age or grade level] as best they could" (my translation).

In the colleges of education, including those located in and serving counties where the majority of the schools do actually have a multi-grade organisation, teaching practice as part of pre-service training is mainly undertaken in single-grade classes. A survey carried out in 1999 showed that of the 18 colleges of education then operating, only one had a deliberate policy which required each student teacher to undertake part of their practice in a multi-grade setting. Practical and economic grounds were cited to explain why multi-grade schools were not employed more frequently in the students' practical training. Clearly, it was more convenient and less expensive for the colleges to provide, as far as was possible, teaching practice placements in the larger primary schools in, or near by, the town or city where the college was located. (Solstad 1999.)

The reason for this relative neglect of multi-grade schooling may be the tendency over a long period of time to regard this type of schooling as educationally undesirable and something to be done away with whenever possible. Although the overall picture with regard to professional support for small rural primary schools is bleak, the following developments may, nonetheless, be pointed out as encouraging.

- *Skoleplassen* (The School Site) is an electronic data base and meeting place (www.skoleplassen.hisf.no) providing various kinds of information related to work in small rural schools. The data base covers purely educational issues (planning, teaching methods, case studies) as well as information on formal procedures and legal matters, for instance, assistance to action groups fighting school closures.
- *Idéhefte for arbeid i udelte og fådelte skular* (Handbook for working in multi-grade schools) was issued by the Ministry of Education in connection with the 1997 National Curriculum for the 10-Years Basic Education.
- *Landslaget for udelt og fådelt skole – LUF* (The National Association for Multi-grade Schools) is a privately run association which recruits its members among teachers, school administrators and research people with an interest in rural education. LUF runs in-service courses for teachers, issues a journal and acts sometimes as a lobby ahead of parliamentary decisions related to education in sparsely populated areas.
- *RKK-Nordland* (Regional Offices for Competence Building – Nordland) is a network of offices which operates as a shared responsibility between a group of municipalities, the regional college of education and the County Director of Education. Its professional focus is upon school management and curriculum and staff development. The system is specifically designed to help small (in terms of population), sparsely populated rural municipalities, that is municipalities in which multi-grade schools are frequently found, to provide adequate professional support for their teachers. The system was introduced in the predominantly rural county of Nordland around 1990. Modified and less extensive versions of this model have been implemented in some other counties as well.
- *Skole og oppvekst i spredtbygd bosetting* (Schooling and Growing-up in Sparsely Populated Areas) is a three-year research and development programme commencing in Autumn 2004 at Høgskolen i Nesna (Nesna Regional College), the most rurally located teacher education institution in Norway. The main purpose of the programme, which consists of six specific projects, is to strengthen the already existing competence of college staff in order to make the college a kind of national stronghold for research and development work in schools serving sparsely populated areas. The other Norwegian colleges having expertise within this field is Høgskulen i Sogn og Fjordane (Sogn og Fjordane Regional College) which is highly involved in the web-site *Skoleplassen* mentioned above, and Høgskolen i Volda (Volda Regional College).

Administrative and para-professional help. There are no systematic arrangements to provide extra administrative or para-professional help for small rural schools. In the case

of small combined primary and lower secondary schools (grades 1-10 schools), a school type which is commonly found in sparsely populated areas where efficient school transportation is difficult to arrange (e.g. island communities and mountainous areas), there will be a school secretary working part-time. In most very small primary schools, that is schools having only one or two classes (two or three teachers), no such secretarial help is likely to be found.

Regarding the use of parents or local people generally in school activities, a recent follow-up study of the 1997 National Curriculum clearly shows that the small rural schools, far more often than larger schools, keep systematic records of educationally relevant resource people in the local community (roughly 50 and 20 per cent respectively) and that the teachers in these small schools also more often report involving local people in learning activities (40% - 20%) (Solstad 2004).

Size and staffing regulations. Since 1915 and up to last year (2004), the successive school acts have included rules for regulating the relationship between the number of pupils and the number of classes in a school. According to the 1998 Education Act, there should be no more than 12 pupils in a class having four or more age groups, 18 pupils in a class of three age groups, 24 pupils in a two age group class, and 28 pupils as the maximum number in a single-grade class. By an amendment to this Act, this traditional formal relationship between the age ranges of multi-grade classes and the number of pupils was abandoned with effect from January 2004. The new regulations plainly state the following on how to organise the pupils:

- The pupils should be grouped as required. The groups should not be larger than what is reasonable educationally and according to safety considerations. The organisation should be such that it attends to the social needs of the pupil. The organisation [of the pupils in groups] should not usually be according to academic merits, gender or ethnicity.
- Each pupil has to be assigned to a dedicated contact teacher who has a particular responsibility for the practical, administrative, and pastoral aspects of the pupil's schooling together with home-school contact.

The claimed advantages envisaged for these changes are the stimulation of school development and thus, quality improvement through more flexibility and greater room for manoeuvre for both the individual school and the school authorities at municipal level. The comments following these changes emphasise that they should not be used as a means of saving money. The old rules for dividing the pupils into classes mentioned above should still be applied to define the minimum level of teacher resources allocated to each school.

The effects of these changes for the small, traditionally multi-grade schools remain to be seen. It may be an advantage that the very rigorous system by which a single-class school in one year might turn into a two-class school in the second, and possibly back again in the third, can be supplanted by much more flexible and inventive forms of whole school multi-grade organisation. Within the new framework, the shifts in per pupil costs from

year to year are less likely to occur, thus making planning somewhat easier.

Pupil achievement. In the 1970s, a number of studies which explored the possible association between pupil progress in school subjects (mainly Norwegian, English and Mathematics) and school size, (naturally including multi-grade classes), found no systematic relationship (Solstad 1978). There seem to be no recent studies which directly address the issue, but the following two investigations do have some relevance. Birkemo (2002) and Arnesen (2003) studied pupils' locations, i.e. sparsely populated area - urban, and their attainments in Norwegian, English and Mathematics test and found no systematic differences. More tangentially, in respect of social learning, Kvalsund (1995) found that multi-grade setting was more conducive than single-grade settings to the development of independence, cooperativeness and the capacity for broad social relationships across age and gender barriers.

Contemporary issues and problems. The more pressing contemporary issues and problems affecting the future of small rural schools will be dealt with in the final section. One point may, however, be made at this stage. The financial situation of many rural municipalities (see below) in combination with the greater local freedom in decision making has tempted many municipalities to do away with the kind of professional back-up established in most municipalities during the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, many small rural schools feel that they have been abandoned with their problems. In most cases the kind of networking to be described below, which might ameliorate this situation, is dependent on municipal level initiatives and support. The very different conditions from one municipality to another may be seen as a threat to the idea of equity in the educational provision across municipalities.

3. THE FUTURE

General trends. At least in a Nordic context, Norway has traditionally been regarded as a country having an active rural policy. Various national level initiatives have been taken to stimulate the infrastructure and economic activities in sparsely populated and peripheral areas in order also to make such areas and settlements as attractive as possible to young and old alike. Within the education sector, such measures include the direct coverage by the state level of the actual municipal costs of running compulsory education, together with positive strategies to recruit teachers into small, remote schools. From time to time, the Ministry of Education made extra resources available to the predominantly rural counties to support development work and in-service training.

The last decade has seen most of these extra measures terminated. We have already noted that those factors favouring typical rural municipalities have been given reduced weight, whereas large cities and urban areas have been treated more generously in the matter of state financial support. Relevant to these evident inequalities, a Nordic comparative study on the ways in which the state level attempts to iron out economic inequalities between municipalities reveals that, whereas “direct and indirect subsidies for sparsely populated and peripheral municipalities” are practised in Finland and Sweden, no such subsidies remain in operation in Norway (Nordisk Ministerråd 2001). Financial constraints in the

rural municipalities constitute the overwhelming threat to the survival of small rural schools, island communities and very remote settlements excepted.

School closures. As the above analysis indicates, the new wave of school closures described in section 2 is likely to continue and perhaps even increase. Actually, in a recent and purely economic analysis made for Kommunal- og regionaldepartementet (The Ministry of Local and Regional Affairs), it is pointed out that a substantial reduction, allegedly without quality risks, in the running costs of compulsory schooling could be obtained, not least through the process of closing down small schools across the country (Borge and Sunnevåg 2005). Furthermore, if the former measures taken to safeguard the quality of small rural schools are not replaced by new initiatives, there is also a risk that the quality of teaching they provide may decline, thus making it easier to close them on educational grounds. The abolition of the direct relationship between number of pupils and class size mentioned earlier may, of course, temporarily reduce the pressure for school closures in some cases. However, in my view, the only way to maintain a relatively decentralised system of primary education provision in many small and financially poor rural municipalities, is to reintroduce a form of earmarked state grant to compensate for the extra per pupil costs which such schools incur. This, of course, is a measure which is not compatible with the principles on which the block grant system is based.

In some cases schools and local communities have been able to save their school by turning it into a private school relying on grants directly from the Ministry of Education. During the last five years some ten small rural schools have been established in the three northernmost counties of Norway because the public school was about to be closed down or was under threat of being so. The process behind a successful application for establishing a private school is, however, too demanding to make this alternative widespread. It may of course also be argued that parents in remote rural areas should be spared the extra burdens of running their own school for their children.

In spite of this bleak outlook for the future of small rural primary schools, there may also be some glimpses of hope. I will end by commenting on a few.

School networking. The risk of professional isolation and limited curriculum coverage in small remote schools figures among the educational arguments commonly held against them. Although such arguments may sometimes be deployed as a cover for the real argument, that of financial constraint, they should not be ignored. Various initiatives to compensate for possible shortcomings in small school such as these should be welcomed:

- 1 *School clusters.* In some case, neighbouring small schools have organised themselves into formal clusters, sometimes also sharing a head teacher, to enable them to draw in a systematic way on the pooled human and material resources. The clusters may be made up of a number of small schools only, but may also include a larger school. If travel conditions permit, this kind of cluster may also include arrangements involving direct meetings between pupils from two or more of the clustering schools.

- 2 *Electronic networking* may be a supplement to the above-mentioned activities, but may also involve distant schools with common interests or challenges. The national electronic base for small schools mentioned in section 2 may assist in identifying relevant schools for such networking. In some cases, the technical facilities allow for direct on-screen two-way communication, so that a teacher in one of the networking schools may teach pupils in several schools simultaneously.

Successful developments such as these are now evident in Norway, which, if implemented on a larger scale, may enhance the quality of teaching and learning in small rural schools.

Community active schools. This concept is used to describe a school that not only uses the local environment actively as a teaching resource and cooperates in more traditional ways with the local community, but also tries to provide relevant and important services for the community (Solstad 1997). In the rural context such a school may be seen as an innovative centre in the struggle for developing sustainable communities. In a recent study (Rønning *et al.* 2003) of small rural schools we were able to identify a number of initiatives in the direction of community active schools such as:

1. The school as a provider of varied expanded services within education and care (e.g. kindergarten, study centre for young people and adults).
2. The school as a local community and service centre (e.g. information centre for municipal services generally, providing office services and sometimes work places for very small businesses).
3. The school as a centre for developing and sustaining local cultural activities.

Schools succeeding in this kind of development may also be less vulnerable financially to incidental fluctuations in pupil numbers. To be effective, the community active school requires a reconceptualisation of how schools should be governed, managed and financed. Much thought and work lies ahead before this kind of schools becomes the common pattern in rural areas.

National level initiative. A joint Swedish-Norwegian initiative to survey and analyse the education provision in remote and sparsely populated areas from kindergarten to higher education was undertaken in autumn 2003. A report, especially focusing on the question of equity and segregation, is just being completed (Solstad and Thelin, in press). The intention is to provide ideas for the two national authorities on how to improve the education provision in the target areas of the study. Some of the issues dealt with in the present document are also dealt with in this report. The most promising aspect of this Swedish-Norwegian initiative is, maybe, that the national levels actually pay attention to the fate of rural education.

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SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS: AN ICELANDIC PERSPECTIVE

Rúnar Sigþórsson and Þóra Björk Jónsdóttir

The context of primary schools in Iceland

Iceland is a republic with a parliamentary democracy. It lies on the borders of the temperate and the Arctic zones with the total area of approximately 103,000 km² of which only 23% is arable land. At 31st December 2004, the population of Iceland stood at 293,577 with a population density of 2.5 inhabitants per square km.¹ The population is homogeneous, being almost entirely descended from the Norse settlers of the 9th century, although there has been some immigration from other countries, especially in recent years.

The Icelandic school system consists of four levels: Pre-schools up to 6 years of age; compulsory schools 6 – 16 years of age, providing primary and lower secondary education; upper secondary schools 16 – 20 years of age and higher education. Many of the upper secondary schools although offer shorter vocational courses.² The upper secondary sector has a very different organisation from the compulsory school which will not be described here. However, many of the policy implications discussed here apply equally well to secondary schools.

There are currently about 180 compulsory schools in Iceland. Virtually all of them are public (as opposed to private) schools. Around 60 of them are small schools with less than 120 pupils.³ In accordance with the Compulsory School Act of 1995 the financial and administrative responsibility for the compulsory sector was devolved to the municipality level so that the local municipalities are now responsible for compulsory schooling. They are also responsible for the implementation of pre-schooling. The country is divided into over thirty Local Educational Authorities, run by the local communities.⁴ Their main responsibility is to assist schools in catering for special needs, providing psychological service for pupils when needed, advising on the organisation of teaching and learning, promoting school development and playing a role in in-service education and staff development.

Educational equality is ensured partly by the government's responsibility for the whole system and partly by a detailed national curriculum. There is a system of nationally co-ordinated achievement tests in Icelandic and Mathematics in grade 4 and 7 and also in six core subjects in grade 10, at the end of the elementary school.⁵ The year 10 tests are

¹ Hagstofa Íslands.

² Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2002.

³ Hagstofa Íslands.

⁴ Samband ísklenskra sveitarfélaga.

⁵ Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2002.

optional, but the vast majority of students take at least four of them. There is little official evaluation or inspection of individual schools, or of the national system. However, in accordance with the Compulsory School Act of 1995, The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has introduced a program for inspecting each individual school's self evaluation system every 5th year.⁶

There is a strong emphasis on inclusiveness and equal educational opportunities in the primary school. In theory, every child is entitled to schooling in his or her home community but in practice, some schools in rural and remote areas have difficulties in catering for children with severe handicaps or learning disabilities.⁷

Most Icelandic communities are very small. Nearly two-thirds (180.000) of the 290.000 population of the country live in and around the capital. Of the other 110.000, some live in smaller towns, whilst the bulk of the remainder live in rural communities or fishing villages with population of between 200–400 people, most of which run their own local school. There are only 20.000 people living in small villages of fewer than 200 or in dispersed rural situations.⁸ Taking over the elementary school was a formidable task for many of these communities.

Small Schools in Iceland

1. THE PAST

The first schools in rural Iceland were established near the turn of the 19th century. Prior to that, children were taught at home under the supervision of priests and later, certain teachers appointed to that role. Home tuition continued to be an option for the first three decades of the 20th century. The first rural schools were usually 'travelling' schools. They had no schoolhouse but moved from farm to farm, staying from four to eight weeks at the same place and catering for the children of the neighbourhood, before moving on to a new location and a new group of children. In the towns, ordinary day schools were established, whilst the 'travelling' school continued to be a common form of schooling in rural Iceland until the middle of the 20th century.⁹

In the thirties, however, boarding schools gradually started to replace the travelling schools and became the most common form of schooling. Many of these schools were built collaboratively by several local communities.¹⁰ In the eighties and especially in the nineties, as roads and cars improved, nearly all of these schools were turned into day schools.

⁶ Menntamálaráðuneytið 2004.

⁷ The National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory School. General Section 2004.

⁸ Byggðastofun.

⁹ Loftur Guttormosson 1992.

¹⁰ Rúnar Sigþórsson.

2. THE PRESENT

Policy and forms of decision-making in relation to the retention or closure of small rural primary schools and, where applicable, the systems of *financial* support underlying such policy and decision-making.

Today small schools exist in rural Iceland and also in the many fishing villages along the coast. In rare cases, children live with families in small villages over the school week and travel home for the weekend. Originally the largest of the rural schools had just over 100 pupils, but now after the decline in Icelandic agriculture over recent years, which has been followed by the depopulation of many rural areas, rural schools with over 80 students on roll are quite rare. On the other hand, very small schools, with less than 20 or 30 pupils are also relatively few. Presently there are about 15 of them and there are five schools of under 10 pupils. The larger schools (70–80 pupils plus) are usually all age schools (6–16) but the smaller schools usually have pupils from 6–12 or 6–14 years. In these latter cases, the pupils go to bigger area schools to finish their compulsory education.

Unlike Britain and Norway, for example, the debate about the viability of the small school was not very active until recently. In the many small fishing villages along the coast and in the sparsely populated agricultural areas, their existence was tacitly accepted as inevitable and closure proposals were therefore rare. This began to change in the last decade of the 20th century and, in the wake of a massive amalgamation of municipalities, the debate on the viability of small schools came to life. After the devolution of responsibility for the compulsory school (a consequence of the 1995 Compulsory Education Act) the local authorities now decide on school closure or changes in the structure of the school.¹¹ Two examples of changes in the structure of schooling are (a) where two schools are put jointly under one headmaster and (b) where two or three schools are merged into one institution operating on more than one site. In such circumstances, the youngest students go to one of the former schools, the middle grades to another and so on. This is often said to be done to ‘get rid of’ multi-age classes and make graded classes possible, which seems to be preferred by authorities and, in some cases, teachers. There is the closure of a small school every year. In rare cases, closure is promoted by parents, who find the small school lacking in professionalism and see the big school as a better provider of education for their children. What is more common is that the local authorities decide to close a small school because of the cost. This is often so when there are more than one school in the community, for instance after the amalgamation of two or more small communities. In such a case, the small school goes and the bigger one in the village becomes the only school in the community. Often, however, there also seems to be a tacit assumption that the small schools are in some ways inferior institutions in terms of the education they provide.

¹¹ Rúnar Sigbórsson.

Small municipalities get their cost of schooling partly refunded by The Local Authorities Equalization Fund. It has the role to allocate funds to municipalities to equalise their financial situation and compensate for difference in costs of schooling e.g. bussing, teacher maternity leaves, catering for severely handicapped students etc.¹²

Forms of *professional* support and organisation (central and local) specifically created for small rural primary schools, e.g. pre- and in-service training, forms of inter-school cooperation and integration. Provision of *administrative* and *para-professional help* for small rural primary schools.

There is no special professional support particularly provided for small compulsory schools. However the Local Educational Authorities mentioned above provide consultation with special needs and, in some cases, teaching and learning. Small schools, like any other schools, also have access to INSET courses provided by the LEAs or other institutions such as universities. Their financial capability to buy in courses or the services of independent working consultants is, however, limited.¹³

The main provider of professional support, aimed specially at small primary schools has been The Association of Small Schools in cooperation with the University of Education in Reykjavik and the University of Akureyri and in some cases local authorities. The association was founded in 1989 with the main purpose of enhancing relationships and communication between small schools in Iceland and to improve the quality of the education they provide. Also, the Association has put a great emphasis on ways to promote the professional development of teachers in small schools¹⁴

Small schools do not, as a rule, have much administrative help, but there are para-professionals mostly to be seen working with teachers where there are children with special needs in the school.

Regulations relating to the size and staffing of multi-grade classes and special needs provision.

There are no regulations now on class size or staffing in classes in Iceland. The Education Act that was valid until 1995 had such guidelines and these are still used as guidance by some local authorities but otherwise, such matters have to be negotiated between the head teacher and the local authorities. The headmaster is free to organise the schools within his/her responsibility as she/he decides. The same applies to special needs provision.

Pupil achievement in small rural primary schools.

No official research is available on pupil achievement in small rural primary schools in Iceland. In an unofficial study a few years ago on student achievement in the nationally co-ordinated tests in Icelandic and mathematics in grade 4 and 7, no difference was found between pupil performances in small and large schools outside the capital area. There is, however, a difference in student performance between the capital area and other parts of the country in favour of the former. This difference is more prominent in the 7th grade

¹² Félagsmálaráðuneytið.

¹³ Þóra Björk Jónsdóttir 2000.

¹⁴ Hafstein Karlson 1995 Samtök fámennra skóla.

than in the 4th grade.¹⁵

Among the small schools there are examples of schools where student performance is in the top ranking year after year and others where performance sits at the bottom year after year.

The results for Iceland from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study which is an internationally standardised assessment jointly developed by participating countries and administered to 15 year olds in schools reveals a gender difference in achievement in mathematics in favour of girls. This difference is significant outside the capital area. Again, nothing indicates that this difference is greater in smaller schools.¹⁶

Contemporary issues and problems in small rural primary schools.

At present, small schools have to fight for their existence in a number of ways. More amalgamation of municipalities is currently under way. As a result, new municipalities will be formed with several schools perhaps not very far from each other. The obvious option for many local politicians seems to be to close these schools down.

The political assumption underlying the devolution of financial and administrative responsibility of both pre-school and compulsory sector seems to be that education is not a national but a local responsibility. This has resulted in fragmented responsibility for education where each local community, big or small, poor or rich, is left with the responsibility for the education of their children. The smallest of communities are compensated to some extent, but such compensation is not adequate for some of the most sparsely populated communities that are really struggling to provide a viable education for their children and teenagers. The decline of schooling in these communities could result in a vicious circle; if the school declines, the community becomes less attractive to families as a place to live, thus hastening community depopulation and advancing the possibility of school closure.¹⁷

In parts of the country such as these, there is a shortage of qualified teachers in some subject areas and also a great turnover, even among those who are qualified.¹⁸ This obviously makes any continuing development of schools and teachers difficult and in many cases puts an extra workload on the qualified members of staff. In addition, teacher salaries are low, thus forcing many people to work overtime and even to take extra work outside the school during the two months' summer vacation, and even during the school year.

As mentioned earlier, the Local Educational Authorities are supposed to play an important role in supporting and assisting schools. This is even more crucial for small

¹⁵ Þóra Björk Jónsdóttir.

¹⁶ Námsmatsstofun, OECD.

¹⁷ Rúnar Sigþórsson.

¹⁸ Hagstofa Íslands.

schools than others, because they have fewer staff and are less likely to employ specialised teachers for all subject areas. Further, many of them do not have qualified special needs teachers, either. Since the 1995 Compulsory Education Act, the local communities have been responsible for the support service, which is either provided by the LEAs or bought from independent consultants. The implementation seems to have gone in diverse directions across the country, resulting in diversity of the service. Obviously the rural and remote communities, many of which are relatively poor, are the least likely to be able to make quality provision of support to schools, with the likely consequence that practice in small schools will be affected detrimentally.

3. THE FUTURE

Small schools will inevitably continue to be a prominent part of the Icelandic school system and they will continue to be one of the main preconditions for attracting young people to many areas. It is therefore imperative that these schools are accepted on their own right and regarded as an integral part of the communities they serve and hence, given equal opportunities for the development of their educational provision. For that purpose, the problems discussed above need to be counteracted in a number of ways:

- The support service for the schools has to be secured, whether provided by the Local Education Authorities or by the schools being given adequate resources to buy services from independent consultants.
- The Association of Small Schools should continue to play an important role as a forum for schools to cooperate, and as a provider of professional support. The financial basis of the association should be secured, either by the Ministry of Education or by the Association of Local Authorities in Iceland.
- Schooling in the most remote and sparsely populated areas of Iceland needs to be viewed as a common national responsibility and the financial basis for schooling in such communities should be better secured than it is now.
- Small schools should seek to strengthen their community involvement.
- School clusters and networks should be promoted. Many parts of Iceland are quite sparsely populated and some communities are isolated, not least during the winter. This geographical isolation makes the formation of school clusters more difficult and more costly but at the same time more important. This should be taken in to consideration, with opportunities for teachers to meet and also to facilitate interactions with the help of new technology.

- New opportunities of communication technology to connect schools and their pupils should be exploited and developed, both for educational and social purposes.
- Last but not least, staff in small schools must make continuous school and professional development their first priority. The sharpest weapon in the struggle for the existence of small schools is a general recognition that they are viable institutions providing first-rate education for young people.

In Iceland now, there is a trend in education towards individual education for all children.¹⁹ This has made larger schools look on the working traditions in small schools, such as multi-age teaching, as preferable and the spotlight is on how good small schools work and plan their education to meet the needs of every student. This hopefully will strengthen the continued existence and self-esteem of small schools.

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¹⁹ The National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory School, General Section 2004, Stefna fræðsluráðs Reykjavíkur um sérkennslu 2002.

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SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Alan Sigsworth

Past into the Present - a general background. To read across the Past and Present sections of the national contributions, is to gain an impression not only of how integral a part the small rural school has played (and continues to play) in rural areas, but also how it has been threatened (and continues to be so) by shifts in demographic patterns, the deliberate and the unforeseen consequences of national legislation and, at times, narrow political interests.

Up to World War II, multi-grade schools in rural areas were simply taken for granted elements in the education systems of the countries within this inquiry. From the mid-1950s onwards, the question of their place in national educational systems has been a continuing issue, with the exception of Iceland where the matter of their viability has only recently arisen. After World War II, with democracy assured in Western Europe, the political arena was a ferment of ideas with the ideal of equality of educational opportunity well to the fore. Large schools, powerfully resourced, were seen as the essential means to its achievement. Improvements in roads and transportation in rural areas meant that large schools could be strategically established in rural areas and the children brought to them. Further, though rarely voiced, the financial savings to be achieved by the closure of small schools, constituted a powerful enticement to politicians and planners. And so, small school closures began. As the Norwegian paper notes, over the period 1950 to 1970, the number of schools in rural municipalities declined to half the 1950 number. Similar large-scale closures in England and Wales paralleled those in Scandinavia, for 1660 village schools ceased to exist between 1955 and 1974. The charge that small schools were disadvantaging institutions, made without supporting evidence, often cloaked the underlying economic rationale.

Whilst the closure of small schools continued across the 70s and into the 80s in England and Wales, a loss of confidence in the policy developed in Scandinavia, not least because it was thought to have a depopulating effect. That change of view was evidenced in the theme of the 1976 Swedish Interskola conference *“The school as an activating factor in the cultural life of sparsely populated areas.”*

Although the early to middle 1980s in Scandinavia were relatively quiescent so far as small school closures were concerned, legislative changes formulated in that period were to yield unexpected consequences in the future. These changes, as well as offering schools greater curriculum freedom, also devolved responsibility to municipalities for determining how the governmental block grant should be shared out between community services, including education, and how and where economies would be made. The consequences for the small schools within their purview is evident in the contributions of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. In Norway, for example, whilst the number of small multi-grade schools remained largely unchanged during the period 1978-88, ten years later that number had been halved. Similar effects were apparent in Sweden and

Finland. As the papers indicate, closures continue.

Mrs Thatcher liked neither railway trains nor local education authorities. Wishing to diminish the power of the latter, her government enacted legislation in the 80s which allowed schools to opt out of local authority control and to be grant-funded from central government. An unanticipated consequence was that if a small school was threatened with closure, it could simply move towards independence. Almost all LEAs in England and Wales observed an unspoken moratorium on rural school closures for the next fifteen years.

At present, as Alwyn Evans describes in his Welsh contribution, local education authorities and their schools, like their counterparts in England, are subject to the scrutiny of the National Audit Commission, which is charged with assessing whether public money is being used “economically, efficiently and effectively”. The Audit Commission’s key concern is to do with empty classroom seats or, in its own terminology, “surplus places”. The human ecology of the small rural school is delicately balanced and hence, particularly vulnerable to the Commission’s approach. Like the change which small schools in Scandinavia are facing, it would seem that in Wales and in England also, quantitative economic concerns have the edge over qualitative valuations.

There are times, of course, when there is no other option but to close a small school. And, there is no single principle upon which a decision to close a small school can rest. As Alwyn Evans points out, political decisions on a small school’s future entail other decisions:

Education services.... cannot be considered in isolation - the effect on other aspects of community provision must not be undervalued. If there is no school in a village, other services such as shop and post office also tend to disappear, and young parents are less likely to seek a home in the village. It is also the most fragile communities, linguistically and culturally, that are most likely to suffer from such closures.

We need to know much more about such effects. There is a need for longitudinal, comparative research into how patterns and qualities of life, local economy, institutions and inward and outward migration differ in rural communities which retain their schools and in those which lose them.

Class Size. No one would deny that teaching a multi-grade class is a demanding task, nor that such a class should be small. If equality is held to be a foundation for a country’s education system, one might reasonably assume that the maximum size of a multi-grade class would be clearly defined at a national level. The inquiry responses in the matter of class size provide few grounds for such an assumption.

Ireland stands alone as the country which still strictly regulates class sizes nationally. Elsewhere, in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland, decentralisation has meant that the determination of class size is now a local matter. Special needs provision apart, class sizes are now variable, although some local authorities take heed of former guidelines. In

England, there is no regulation other than that limiting class sizes to thirty for children under seven years. New regulations in England and Wales which allow primary teachers 10% free time within the working week may well result in increased class sizes.

We should note, of course, that whilst the abandonment of national regulation of class size may be seen by some municipalities as a means of achieving economies, others may see it an opportunity to develop more flexible forms of school organisation. That said, it is unquestionably the case that one of the conditions which enables teachers of multi-grade classes to achieve results at least equal to those gained in single grade classes is that their classes are smaller.

Administrative Assistance. The teacher is the prime educational resource available in the classroom and it is commonsense that their professional time should not be dissipated in necessary, yet routine, administrative tasks. This is critically the case in schools with only two or three teachers, one of whom will be the head teacher with both teaching and administrative responsibilities. The inquiry responses show that while Ireland covers the costs of secretarial assistance, other countries do not appear systematically to build such assistance into small school staffing. Commonly reported in this inquiry is the difficulty of recruiting teaching staff to small rural schools. One cannot but speculate on whether such a condition may be one of the several factors that deter teachers from applying for small school headships.

Multi-grade classes. Teaching a multi-grade class is a much more complex activity than that of teaching a single-grade class. Effectively, a class with, say, an age-span of three years requires a three-year curriculum plan in which such matters as topics, projects, literature, poetry, and physical education are skilfully organised and resourced to cater for the extended age-range and the extremely wide ability spread of the pupil group. Further, multi-grade pedagogy does not allow the luxury of pedagogical choice; the teacher must necessarily employ a diverse methodology which includes the development of independent and cooperative learning,

This inquiry indicates little official interest in preparing teachers for, and advising them on, multi-grade teaching. It seems that, even in countries where small schools form a substantial educational element, little to no differentiation is made between large and small schools and between single and multi-grade classes in official curriculum statements, guidelines and advice. Initial teaching education programmes also may only nod in the direction of small schools and the multi-grade classroom. Further (and perhaps because of economic stringency), student teachers, many of whom will inevitably spend their careers in small schools, commonly undertake all their teaching practice in large urban schools. Textbooks often remain stubbornly grade-based.

Pupil Attainment. Given the persistent argument of the anti small school lobby that the achievement of children in small schools must inevitably be inferior to that of their peers in large schools, it is surprising just how little relevant research into the matter has been undertaken. Such evidence as is cited in the national contributions, and largely confined to performance in mathematics and national language tests, points to a condition of no difference or, as the Swedish response has it, “..the size of a school has no impact on the

result”. The relative performances of pupils in large and small schools in other curriculum subjects appear to be unknown.

School Clusters.

Many years ago, there were two single-teacher schools facing each other across a Lofoten fjord. Once or twice a month when the weather was benign, one or other of the two women teachers would row across the fjord to chat and to talk over their work. Maybe they could have laid claim to being cluster pioneers. What is certainly the case is that from Ireland to Finland the practice of school clustering has now firmly rooted. All the papers note the contribution which cluster organisations can make to school and professional development in rural areas. Obviously, from country to country, the conditions, structures, size, activities, priorities, products and problems of clusters will differ. For example, whilst the winter climate and distances between schools may pose few difficulties for school clusters in England, they can represent major problems in countries such as Iceland. That said, school clustering stands out as the major innovation in the provision of in-service education and school development in sparsely populated areas.

School and Community. Whilst the inquiry’s remit did not include the matter of home-community relationships, all the responses made some reference to them. Home-community relationships can, of course, take many forms. Norway’s concept of the ‘community active’ school formally celebrates the idea of the school as the social and educative centre of the community. Informally, many small schools and their communities develop links that are mutually beneficial and characteristically different from those established between large urban institutions and their catchment areas. Such links frequently pass undetected, or are ignored, in the assessments and valuations that local and national bodies attempt to make of the small school.

And the Future?

At the risk of being repetitious, it is necessary to reflect the sense of uncertainty within the papers over the future of small rural schools. The Irish paper speaks for the others in observing that small schools “...have an important contribution to make to rural life” Whilst that is undoubtedly so, school closure is now an endemic feature in sparsely populated areas - presently relatively muted in England and Wales, but sufficiently vigorous in the Scandinavian countries to allow the Swedish observation that “... the continued existence of small schools ... looks more and more uncertain”. There is, too, a sense of these schools being caught at different times between local and national government action. Iceland perhaps speaks for the other Scandinavian countries in calling for schooling in rural areas to be viewed as a national responsibility. That small schools are a vital element in rural life is beyond question. Not for nothing is the village school referred to as ‘the heart of the village’. It educates the young, contributes to social and cultural life and acts as a gravitational force to retain and attract families. Small rural schools and their communities deserve support based upon more informed, more sensitive and more coherent policies than are presently apparent.

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ADDENDUM – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEGISLATORS AT NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL MUNICIPALITIES ,COMMUNITIES AND SCHOOLS

Pedagogic principles and guidelines for action

Prior to the ‘Small Schools’ Inquiry’ we produced a paper for Interskola 2003 that outlined the pedagogic principles we considered it necessary to respect when examining the future of any small school. Nothing that we have found in the inquiry negates these principles; indeed, time and again they are significantly reinforced by the evidence of the contributions. **We recommend strongly**, therefore, that **local communities, school governing bodies, municipalities, local governmental organisations and legislators** take serious note of them when reviewing the future of any small school that is in their field of responsibility.

In addition, a series of guidelines were outlined in Jonathan Sher’s “Revitalising Rural Education, - a Handbook for Legislators” as far back as 1978. These are also summarised below, and are clearly as relevant now as they were then.

Pedagogic Principles

Principle 1.

All small schools possess advantages as well as disadvantages. Each small school possesses particular advantages: *these advantages should be identified and used as developmental starting points.*

Principle 2.

Teacher time in a small school is the school’s most precious commodity: *it should not be dissipated on non-teaching activity.*

- It can be maximised through:
 - Pupils assuming responsibility for routines and tasks.
 - Training children in the skills and ways of independent learning.
 - Reducing such classroom features as ‘settling’ and ‘waiting’ time.
 - Use of ancillary and community assistance.

Principle 3.

The social structure of the small school has distinctive features: *these features should be identified and harnessed to organisational, administrative, teaching and learning tasks.*

- The extended peer group of the small school can become the extended learning group.
- Competency rather than age should be the advancement criterion.

Principle 4.

The small school has too few people (teachers and pupils) to divide its activities on the basis of gender: *schools should be gender-free places.*

- Small schools, like small communities, have more roles than they have people. Such a multiple role context is ideal for removing gender barriers - for both teachers and

pupils.

Principle 5.

The teacher does not have a monopoly on knowledge: *lay people with formal and local knowledge should be drawn into the educational task.*

- In almost all primary schools, parents work with the youngest children - in small schools they (and other community members) commonly work across the age groups.

Principle 6.

Schools and community can generate mutual educative activity: *practical action involving both school and community should be pursued.*

- It can be initiated by the school or by the community.
- Small schools play a vital role by contributing to, and being involved in, community activities.
- ‘We learn the habits of community by practising them.’

Principle 7.

Cooperation with similar, like-minded schools is valuable: *schools should develop forms of contact and cooperation by whatever means possible, in order to exchange ideas, expertise and advice.*

- In an IT aware world, inter-school cooperation can transcend national boundaries.
- Cooperation between schools can enlarge the ‘test bed’ for developmental ideas.
- The reflective school is the school that develops - especially in a reflective cluster.

Guidelines

Guideline 1

- The primacy of local circumstance.
 - There is no standard answer to a small school's situation – every one is different and needs a different solution.

Guideline 2

- Links between schools and their communities need to be strengthened.
 - Reforms that weaken them are counterproductive- the active interdependence of community and school reinforces child learning.

Guideline 3

- The balance between outside decision-making and local control needs to be more equitable.
 - Current support for small schools is limited by inadequate research, tight funding and decisions thrust on the school and community from outside.
 - Avoid the 'done decision'. Ask the community – 'what do we see as the future of our school? How can it be best supported?'

Guideline 4

- Structural reforms and quality issues are two different things.
 - Avoid confusing issues of reorganisation and economies with the issues of effectiveness of multigrade teaching and quality of learning.

Guideline 5

- Reform needs to build on the strengths, not stress the deficiencies, of small schools
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INTERSKOLA NETWORK

Objectives:

The Interskola Network seeks, by stimulating international discussion, to explore and promote:

- education in rural and sparsely populated areas;
- cultural and linguistic identity, particularly among minority cultures and languages;
- comparative education, pedagogic practice and cooperative research;
- delivery of vocational and lifelong learning across a variety of communities;
- the establishment of on-going international links to support the above

The Interskola annual conference has been arranged during July each year for the past 38 years. The 2006 conference will be in Ennistymon, in Ireland and the 2007 conference will take place in Nesna. To be placed on the mailing list for conference and network information, please contact Alwyn Evans 00 44 2920 704301 or alwynazo@aol.com