

Recently a Headteacher colleague asked me why I was lamenting the demise of small secondary schools. He knew of my fairly varied experience. At present I am Head of a small town centre school; before that I was First Deputy Head of a medium/large comprehensive school; before that Headmaster of a small town centre boys' school; before that Head of Administration at a medium/large comprehensive school ... and so on. I have, by the way, deliberately tried to vary my experience, taking in, for example, four years as Head of Department in a girls' secondary school and five years as Head of Department in a College of Further Education. There is a tendency for teachers to stay on course in one mainstream - this being the most sensible route to preferment: I am sure they are right in this. However, this experience does give me a rare opportunity to compare and contrast.

Plymouth is a city with a tradition of small 2/3 form entry secondary schools which have, over many generations, served well the sons and daughters of the city. Over a period of twenty years (from 1968 to 1988) over twenty small schools would have been closed - this is a truly remarkably large number. Falling rolls, substandard accommodation, technological change and a political climate sweeping in a particular direction have combined to kill off these schools. Small is no longer beautiful - it is just not viable - and yet the advantages of the smaller school are undeniable. This is particularly true in the sphere of social education (in its widest sense) - a sphere which is usually ignored in the all-consuming pursuit of external examination passes - so often the criterion of the 'good school'.

The very simple and probably obvious point I wish to highlight in this brief commentary is that as priorities in education begin to change and a greater emphasis is placed on social education and the development of social and life skills, the smaller schools will be missed because they would have been better able to achieve these aims.

Several obvious points present themselves. Most small schools (especially those in Plymouth) have well established community traditions: these have influenced the development of parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. The newer larger schools lack this cohesive link with community spirit. The two small schools of which I have been Head have shared about 350 years of proud achievement. There is no doubt that the development and sustenance of a readily understood and credible ethos is much easier in a small school than in a large one.

From the point of view of pupils there is no geographical vastness to get used to after the small family atmosphere of the primary school: they have the security which comes from readily comprehended bounds instead of the vague vastness of large (often multi-sited) schools. Pupils know every member of staff and most of the other pupils; they know they will be recognised if they offend and missed if they abscond. Parents know the Head and every member of staff; they are not apprehensive of visiting the school and discussing problems (including own family problems). They are not overwhelmed by numbers when they attend parents' evenings. Several long-standing members of staff can relate particularly well to many parents whom they taught.

Relationships are different in the smaller school: they are more intimate and more genuine. Education in relationships in all its aspects, formal and informal, will undoubtedly feature far more in the curriculum of the future.

The movement towards general (i.e. non-specialist, non-vocational) courses up to the age of 16 and the emphasis being placed on the development of social and life skills make the smaller 11-16 school by far the most suitable unit size.

If I may be anecdotal, I have found that criticisms that the smaller unit could not compete with larger schools in academic subjects and sport not proven. In one 2 form entry secondary school of which I was Head (filled with so-called 11+ and 12+ 'failures') I always found it helpful to enter over a quarter of the school for 3 or 4 'O' level subjects in the December of the 5th Year ("getting these out of the way") and then entering them for a further 3 or 4 'O' levels in the Summer. At least a quarter of the school went on to get 'A' levels, degrees, in some cases Ph.D.s and at least 1 D.Sc. that I know of. Academic success was not inhibited in any way because of the smallness of the school. In the sphere of sport, that very small school regularly triumphed over larger competitors, especially in soccer, basketball and swimming. As an example in this latter sport, hardly an international side was announced without old boys being included, and indeed two old boys gained Olympic Gold Medals.

The needs of the nineties and the next century may well be very different indeed from those of the middle of this century. The uncertainties of employment, the greater need of mobility, the greater amount of non-working time (enforced or voluntary) give rise to pupil needs which are so different from those of the fifties

and sixties. In that era of relatively full employment and a different, happier, more secure attitude towards life, it might be thought that larger institutions churning out pupils who had successfully completed courses (and had certificates to prove it) were a phenomenon which seemed acceptable. They did not exist before that era and the point being made is that they were possibly suitable only for that period and that the optimum size for future needs is much, much smaller.

Large schools are, then, the peculiar offspring of the third quarter of this century, with its special climate not previously existing nor continuing into the last quarter. Although experience might shout that the smaller unit is the optimum size, one realises that in this one is merely rowing against the tide.