

Report on research into the communities, cultures,
benefits and challenges of small primary schools
in the Republic of Ireland

SMALL SCHOOLS VALUE FOR LEARNING

SUMMARY REPORT

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Value for Learning: Study of Small Irish Protestant Primary Schools

Anne Lodge and David Tuohy (2016)

Aim of the study

This study aims to address the gaps in our understandings of small Irish primary schools. It provides specific insights into the culture of small schools from a range of perspectives, including those of principals, teachers, members of Boards of Management, patrons, children, and parents. It also engages with patrons and education policy-makers. It examines both the challenges and benefits of teaching and learning in a small school context.

Authors and funding

The study was carried out by Dr. Anne Lodge and Dr. David Tuohy and was based in CICE. It had the financial support of the General Synod Board of Education, the Church of Ireland Primary School Managers' Association, the CICE Board of Governors and DCU.

Methodology

Surveys sent to all teachers, principals, chairpersons and second class parents in 1 teacher, 2 teacher, 3 teacher and 4 teacher primary schools under Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian & Society of Friends patronage in the State. 11 schools also participated in the deeper study involving a one-day visit by an expert researcher who observed classrooms, assemblies, playtime, engaged with focus groups of younger and older children and conducted interviews with principals and teachers. All parents and additional teaching personnel were also surveyed in these volunteer schools.

Participation rate in the study was very high: 83% of all target schools participated. This ensures that the research has a very strong representative value of all the voices in small Protestant primary schools. The survey was constructed to allow comparison with the extensive data collected from parents by Dr. Lodge and Dr. Tuohy in 2011 for the *Our Schools Our Community* study. The timing of the survey allowed for respondents to give their views on the recommendations of the DES small schools Value For Money report.

Summary of Key Findings

Children were very positive about their experiences of their schools across all 11 schools participating in the in-depth study. They focused on the positive relationships, their enjoyment of life and learning in school and their sense of belonging. Children who had previously been in large schools commented positively on the benefit of knowing everyone in the small school and of feeling included by their peer group. A few children wished there was a larger pool of potential friends. Children commented on the lack of bullying in a small school. Older children also commented positively on being given responsibility for younger children in multi-level classes and in the school yard. The main recommendations children made for change were about practical matters such as wanting a bigger playground, more space in their school, more football or an office for the principal. The researchers who visited the 11 schools commented very positively on the capacity of the children to learn independently in their classrooms and their maturity as learners in being prepared to wait for teacher attention for example.

Parents reported three key reasons for choosing their school. High academic standards, religious patronage and the desire to have their children in a small school were most typical reasons. The caring nature of small schools was highly praised by parents and they were equally positive about the quality of teaching and learning which they and their children experienced. The co-educational nature of the schools was also a factor for some of the parents. Small schools were also seen to be very welcoming of parents and of children with special needs. In general, there were very positive responses from parents about the schools' performance in terms of school organisation, academic standards, the care for the children and a welcoming atmosphere. Some parents did have small concerns about the possibility of their children's lives being too insular in a small school and that it could negatively impact on their ability to transition to a much larger second level school. There was relatively little negativity in parental responses though there were comments about the lack of resources.

Teachers were keenly aware of the value of their school to the local faith community and of the benefits of the caring environment & family atmosphere created in the small school for pupils. They felt that children get more teacher attention in small schools and had greater opportunity for both peer and independent learning. Teachers commented positively on the opportunities that a multi-grade class setting presents for facilitating the spiral curriculum. They also commented positively on the benefits of working with children over a longer period of time which enabled them to plan in focused, individual and differentiated ways to meet pupils' needs. Teachers reported the challenge presented by an over-crowded curriculum, especially in a multi-grade setting and the need to engage in significant levels of additional planning. They also reported a sense of isolation from colleagues. However, teachers were also very positive about the great sense of teamwork and informality between them and their colleagues in their small schools. They were very aware that the small size of their school meant that each of them carried significantly heavier loads for such practical things as supervision than would be the case in larger schools. They were aware too that they had limited access to resources.

Chairpersons of Boards reported on the supportive nature of their Board of Management members and the dedication to the good of the school and its community. They noted the challenges they faced in accessing resources for their schools. They also found dealing with capital projects to be somewhat challenging.

Principals reported supportive staffs in their small schools. They also reported that they themselves experienced a high level of stress trying to balance teaching and administrative roles but reported that they were well-motivated for their work in spite of the challenges. Chairpersons and principals each reported ongoing concerns re the maintenance of the pupil numbers, concerns about finance and the difficulty of fund-raising in a small community and the challenge to retain ethos when few of the children belonged to the faith community.

A number of over-arching themes emerged across the different groups who engaged with this research. The first theme focused on ethos..... The second theme focused on satisfaction with the school. It was noted that there was a tendency to high expectations of the schools across many of the categories with universal high levels of satisfaction across all categories with the schools. This included positive responses to the experience of areas such as school ethos even when the individual schools was catering for a range of belief and philosophical ideologies. The third theme focused on the ideology of the multi-grade classroom. In some cases, this was perceived as a unique teaching and learning environment, whereas in other cases it was simply an organisational challenge to mimic the single-grade situation as closely as possible. The fourth theme was two-fold and focused on challenges facing schools, particularly the area of resources and teacher workload.

1. Ethos

'Ethos' in the context of this research is a multi-layered term. It embraces both the denominational patronage of the school and also encapsulates the community and relational dimension of a small school. The research has shown that the demographic profile of parents, teachers and principals is quite diverse in terms of their respective religious identities. The principals and teachers expressed a high level of commitment to, and support for, a traditional understanding of denominational school ethos focused on their identity as Protestant schools. They also expressed a very high level of support for, and pride in their schools as small schools. Parents' perspectives on ethos were more diverse, reflecting the demographic diversity of the parent respondents. The schools provide an important link to community and parish for parents within the reformed Christian traditions as well as providing an important alternative within the system for many other parents.

The Patron is faced with the challenge of affirming their commitment and investment in these schools in the face of such a diverse intake. The question might be posed as whether this is a school for Protestants or is it a Protestant school for all? This requires a dynamic vision that integrates educational, social and religious aspirations into a coherent statement of ethos that is inclusive and affirmative of a range of experiences.

The challenge is to support the leaders in schools, those who act in a voluntary capacity on a Board of Management, and those who have a formal role in teaching and learning, to articulate this vision for each small Protestant school. As the governance of the schools is delegated to the voluntary contribution of people often not well-versed in educational theory, they can be challenged by the complex educational, social, cultural and political environments in which they are required to operate.

2. Satisfaction with the school

The loyalty and pride that parents and teachers feel in their school is developed over their satisfaction with a wide range of the achievements, activities and relationships experienced in their school. An analysis of the parent responses shows that they are very happy with their experience of the school.

There is a strong sense of the care that is given to pupils. This partly reflects an assumption that children get a high level of adult attention in a small school but also reflects the relationships across age-groups between children. Parents reported strong outcomes for the social development of children and made a direct link between this development and activities in a multi-grade setting. Similarly, the parents found the schools very hospitable, and the teachers saw some benefits in the multi-grade setting for promoting the sense of partnership with parents. This is probably linked to the fact that they deal with the same parents and child for two or more successive years.

The academic performance of the schools was affirmed by both parents and teachers. Some teachers expressed reservation about the capacity of all pupils to learn independently. A number of them highlighted the additional challenges that this can pose for children with particular learning needs. The *Value for Money* report emphasised that there were no discernible differences between larger or smaller schools in terms of learning outcomes. We acknowledge that the different school types exhibit the same variation of educational outcomes, regardless of size. Our research did not set out to investigate the quality of delivery and outcomes, yet parents expressed universal satisfaction with both learning and social outcomes. Many parents ascribed these achievements as being a consequence of the small school, multi-grade context in which their children were being educated.

3. Ideology on multi-grade classrooms

A key element of the development of the small school is the way that teachers conceptualise their work in the multi-grade classroom. Teachers' experiences of their work leading learning in such a setting can be experienced as a tension between dominant single-grade model and the real-life situation in which they work.

There was some evidence from teacher interviews and their open responses to the questionnaire that the dominant image of teaching was to engage with pupils at their own grade level as much as possible. Some teachers talked about having expectations of children performing as well as those in single-grade classrooms with 'half the teaching time' (in a two-grade classroom) and a 'quarter the teaching time' (in a four-grade classroom), as if the time that pupils were not with the teacher was not a valuable learning experience.

In classroom observation, there was a strong element of well organised classrooms where teachers deal with one group and assigned work to another, and later turned to the second group with the first worked by themselves. There was a stress on independent learning, where children found their own pace through worksheets and workbooks, sometimes with little interaction with their peers or with other pupils in the classroom. Pupils spoke of liking activities and wishing for less time filling out worksheets. Pupils spoke of overhearing lessons taught to other groups in the same classroom, rather than being part of these lessons.

In other classrooms, there was genuine multi-grade teaching, where a theme was presented to different grades together and developed either in cooperative learning between grades, or else in separate grades, with the pupils coming together at the end. Pupils told us of group work projects they enjoyed, of helping younger pupils and younger pupils talked about mentors and help from older ones.

It seems that some subjects lend themselves more to the multi-grade experience – art, SESE and to some extent English writing and reading. In these subjects, the curriculum is seen more as a spiral, where the same topic can be revisited at different levels. Topics like mathematics however tend to be seen as more linear, with pupils building on prior knowledge to get to new levels and new skills. The NCCA are currently in the process of developing a new curriculum for primary schools and have targeted English, Irish and Mathematics in the first instance. They are focusing on developing the spiral curriculum which broadens learning outcomes with eight key milestones. These milestones are not to be seen as a linear model of key stage achievement for assessment. Rather it is seen as an aid for teachers planning the delivery of the curriculum in a 'mixed ability' or 'multi-grade' setting. This approach takes into account the diverse nature of classrooms and the need for differentiated learning. It recognises the broad 'multi-grade' experience within Irish primary classrooms and is hoped that it will be a major asset for teachers in small schools.

4. Challenges: Resources

Schools think of resources in many different ways. The school building is a resource. Many small schools reflect the historical circumstances of their foundation – built beside a parish church with little room for expansion. Others are new schools, built to modern specification, with good grounds. Schools also perceive their community itself as a resource. The surveys and interviews provided clear evidence from the participants that the school community, personnel, history and location were all regarded very positively. There was far more concern about lack of access to material resources and lack of certainty about future resourcing.

Financial resources impact on the development of facilities and activities within the school. Funding for schools, and to some extent the payment of Principals, is based on a per capita model which assumes that the costs of schools, and the work of Principals, relates entirely to the number of pupils.

Annual monies received from the State are also based on capitation and the fixed costs such as heating and lighting are spread over the number of pupils, no matter how many. In many cases this favours larger and newer schools. An example of how this works was given where a principal talked about the work involved in sending a letter to parents. A fixed cost element is the writing and editing of the letter, which is independent of the number of recipients. The variable cost element has to do with preparing envelopes for distribution. Perhaps a new model of funding, which is more nuanced, is desirable, especially in small schools.

5. Challenges: Teacher workloads

Teachers' responses indicated that their experience of the multi-grade classroom, while busy and challenging, is also rewarding. The key stress point for teachers was the amount of time that they spent on planning. Their focus was on developing resources to suit a wider range of pupil abilities and interests than they might have found in a single-grade classroom. The dominant view of the curriculum among teachers in Ireland seems to be a subject-based curriculum with a multiplicity of objectives. Teachers find it challenging to meet the varied needs of children in a multi-grade classroom and to plan and organise for these wide-ranging needs. Teachers have a professional sense of commitment to delivering the full curriculum to all pupils. This creates a logistical problem of organising classrooms and scheduling learning experiences so that each grade level separately experiences the full curriculum. This links with section 2 above regarding the multi-grade classroom and has strong implications for the development of modules on multi-grade teaching in initial teacher education for all participants, and for the support of teachers in multi-grade classrooms in their CPD.

Teachers are hindered by the dominant methodology presented in text books which tend to focus on the single-grade context only. The resource support that teachers would typically find in textbooks is dominated by publishers' ideology of producing multiple texts for each single-grade setting. This creates a challenge for teachers in multi-grade settings to integrate activities and exercises presented in discrete units or to develop their own resources.

Recommendations

- 1** Patrons may need to look at new structures beyond the current management support structures, for communicating an ethos statement that incorporates both the denominational and small school elements and supporting Boards of Management and school leaders in its delivery.
- 2** This research set out to describe the experiences of small schools. The general context of satisfaction was explored in detail in eleven schools, each of which was visited for a single day. To understand the dynamic at work within these schools, a more extensive research approach would be required. This research would focus on two points – (a) the interaction between parents’ and children’s interaction with their schools and their satisfaction ratings and (b) the internal dynamics of the classroom and the range of activities experienced over the full annual cycle.
- 3** While recognising the complexity of funding models within Irish education, especially with one and two-teacher schools, some serious thought needs to be given to developing a new, more nuanced, model of funding that takes account of the fixed and variable cost elements of a school. This might also be applied to Principal’s allowances.
- 4** The multi-grade experience in Irish primary schools is a reality that encompasses many larger schools but particularly impacts on the Protestant small schools, where this research was focused. Further research is required on how the Teaching Council, Initial Teacher Education and inservice / CPD providers can support teachers in working in this context. A particular point of progress might be in the way text books and other resources are presented for teachers and pupils as is being modelled in the new developments within the curriculum being developed by the NCCA.