

SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS *in Northern Ireland*

A Policy Discussion Document Prepared for the Rural Community Network

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“The Rural Community Network (RCN) is a voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality”.

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“We are committed to continually improving the quality of our services to our members and the wider rural community and the standards of our work and organisational practices”.

A large type version of this text is available on request

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Introduction

I would like to introduce Rural Community Network's series of policy discussion papers. This series has been produced for RCN by a number of leading academics in Northern Ireland. The aim is to promote discussion on issues that are of concern for rural communities and to create greater awareness and knowledge of rural policy issues.

RCN, for a number of years, has engaged in community consultations to inform different areas of policy. While consultations, conferences and resulting publications have been informative, the lack of research to support the proposals has often weakened the credibility of our case. To enable the voice of rural communities to impact on policy consultations these research papers provide an important independent backdrop.

The policy discussion documents outline issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality in rural areas and provide a baseline on current thinking. In the present series, five areas have been prioritised – Reconciliation and Social Inclusion in Rural Areas, Rural Women, The Environment and The Farming Community, Planning and Settlement Patterns and this document Small Rural Schools.

Each discussion document scans the current research on each topic, informs our understanding, encourages questions and provokes debate.

Using this paper and your own knowledge we would like you to explore issues and questions in relation to small rural schools. This is a timely issue and is linked to the ongoing debate on the selection process for secondary education in Northern Ireland.

Why Focus on Small schools?

In recent years rural communities have seen the rationalisation of many services. This is evident even within rural schools with centralised catering facilities, the lack of funding allocation to some small schools, centralisation of reception class into larger schools which all in turn have knock on effects for the wider rural community.

Some eight years ago RCN and the Rural Development Council highlighted the situation of small schools in two reports, seeking a policy for rural schools. Both published reports put forward a series of recommendations – such as the clustering and sharing of small school resources and greater community involvement in decision making. The following year, 1994, DENI produced its proposed strategy on small schools, which ironically seemed to overlook many of recommendations and concerns coming from rural communities!

Recent reprieves on a number of small schools would indicate a different approach by the current Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness - another indication of how the local administration can make a difference. Hopefully this signals a new direction with an appreciation of the grave ramifications of school closure for the individual children in such schools and the impact on their community.

Why are rural small schools important?

The local rural school is more than bricks and mortar, it can function at many levels if fully utilised. In many areas it is the heart of the community. The school can often act as a central focal point to the development plan and the attractiveness of the area in its attempt to develop and become self-sustainable.

It was good to find that the Minister in a recent article for Network News recognised that "... it is essential to preserve a strong network of good rural schools as part of the infrastructure required to reinforce our rural communities and ensure equality of opportunity and accessibility to education. In this context, small schools warrant special consideration in ensuring that they continue to be an asset to the community they serve".

The Minister went on to offer four commitments to rural communities:

"First, I will be flexible in dealing with this issue and I will not impose rigid or inappropriate models of provision. Second, I will look at every individual case on its own merits and I will listen to all the views expressed. Third, I will encourage and support creative solutions to the educational needs of rural communities, including options such as clustering and federation. And fourth, I will not approve any proposals for closure of schools unless I am completely satisfied that there has been full and open consultation with local communities and that every effort has been made to address their concerns".

Such a commitment is very welcome and may reassure rural communities that the Minister will give greater priority to the sensitivities and concern of rural communities.

Given the current interest in education this paper also provides the opportunity to get many of the specific rural issues into the public arena for discussion.

Issues raised within the paper are linked to different levels of policy and wider societal concerns. A series of questions at the end of the document may help the reader reflect on the issues raised. This paper is by no means intended to be the final word!

We look forward to receiving your views.



Niall Fitzduff

Small Rural Schools in Northern Ireland

Introduction

In the last fifty years there has been a massive programme of closures of small rural primary schools in a number of different countries including the United States (Sher and Tomkins, 1977) and England and Wales (Bell and Sigsworth, 1987). In Northern Ireland there were over 450 schools with between 26 and 50 pupils in 1964, but by the early 1990s this had declined to less than 150 schools. As we will see below, the closure of small schools has continued in more recent years as a consequence of a Department of Education initiated review.

Northern Ireland has always had a large number of small schools, both because of the rural character of the area, and the fact that separate schools for Protestants and Catholics has often meant there are two schools in areas where otherwise there might only be one. If we are to continue to lose these schools there is a very real danger of weakening rural community life irretrievably. There is no set definition of a small school, but as we shall see below, many policy-makers and administrators seem to work on the assumption that the 'typical' primary school is urban and has a relatively large enrolment. This 'tunnel-vision' has encouraged the view that small primary schools are somehow or other deficient and should be rationalised into larger units.

No one wishes to retain schools, of whatever size, that are falling apart. However, the 'tunnel-vision' afflicting policy appears to have blinded policy-makers and administrators to evidence which refutes many of the claims that small schools are deficient and which highlights the positive learning environments created in these schools. This paper seeks to redress this balance a little by examining the evidence on small schools. The hope is that any decisions on the future of small schools will be taken after an objective consideration of the evidence.

The rationale for rationalisation

Sher and Tomkins (1977) have argued that the closures of small schools in the United States were justified by an approach, which emphasised large size, specialisation and professionalisation, and assumed that the most desirable model was that provided by urban primary schools. Thus, if the assumed norm of best practice was the large urban school, small rural schools, almost by definition, represented an abnormality that required correction.

This argument was developed further by Bell and Sigsworth (1987) who focused on small rural schools in England and Wales and pointed to three defining moments at which such schools were deemed deficient.

The first defining moment came in the pre-war period when the Hadow Committee was laying down the basis for primary education. The 1926 Hadow Report made the case for separate primary and secondary levels of education to displace the all-through elementary schools that existed at that time. The 1931 Hadow Report

focused more particularly on the nature of primary schools, and, while it commended work going on in some rural schools, it accepted psychological evidence on intelligence and therefore recommended streaming by ability. However, an adequate streaming system, linked to an assumed need for age-banding among pupils, led the committee to recommend that primary schools should have a pupil enrolment of no less than 300-400 pupils, a recommendation that necessarily cast many rural schools as too small.

By the 1960s the interest in and attachment to theories of intelligence had been displaced by an interest in how children learn. The Plowden and Gittens Reports, published in 1967, highlighted this interest and offered a clear commitment to 'progressive education'. This period represents the second defining moment for Bell and Sigsworth. The Plowden and Gittens Reports again commended practice in some rural primary schools, but in recommending a raising of the transfer age to 12, the development of middle schools for 9-12 year olds and the need for semi-specialist teachers, they identified a model of best practice that, once again, was more suited to urban than rural contexts. In other words, now it was not the difficulty of streaming that was a problem, but rather the extra cost, teacher and pupil isolation and the limited curriculum of small schools that was assumed to render them inadequate.

A similar set of concerns can be seen in a Northern Ireland report published in 1968 (Advisory Council on Education, 1968). This report recommended that the minimum size of a rural primary school should be set at about 100 pupils and four teachers and, while accepting that there was no evidence for poorer performance among pupils in small rural primary schools, pointed to a number of factors which it felt produced such poorer performance. A particular point highlighted in the report, however, was the poor condition of rural primary schools, some of which did not have an electricity supply. It was as if small rural schools were in danger, in this period, of falling into a circular argument: because resources were directed towards building new secondary schools, money for primary developments was limited. Given the uncertainty over the future of small schools, resources were not directed to tackling some of their basic problems. However, the poor facilities were then taken as additional evidence for closing the schools down.

The third defining moment (Bell and Sigsworth, 1992) was provided by the requirements of the 1988 Education Reform Act (1989 Education Report Order, Northern Ireland). The origins of these reforms can be seen in developments from the mid-1970s onwards. Over this period politicians in Britain articulated increasing concern with educational standards, the Department of Education sought greater clarity and specificity in educational objectives and the Inspectorate argued the case for a common curriculum in all schools. The education reforms encapsulate all three tendencies with the development of a common curriculum, assessment testing, and enhanced parental choice and information on school performance. This most recent model of best practice in primary schools recommends specialist teachers with expertise in particular curricular areas. Inter alia this requires that primary schools have a sufficient pupil enrolment to allow for the number of specialist teachers that would be required to cover the range of the common curriculum. Thus, although the definition of best practice has changed once again, rural schools continue to be cast as deficient, but now because their small size does not permit them to employ enough teachers to cover the required range of specialist teaching.

Throughout these fluctuations in the fortunes of rural primary schools there has been one common factor. The rural school has been judged by comparison with the large urban school, although the assumption involved in this has rarely, if ever, been examined. To this Bell and Sigsworth highlight a further paradox. At each of the defining moments the criteria for best models of primary schooling have shifted in a way that small rural schools have become defined as abnormal or inappropriate. Despite this, at each period the particular advantages and achievements of small rural primary schools have been identified and acknowledged; yet these advantages have been overridden by the assumed advantages of larger size.

We might add here an additional paradox: despite the apparent clarity on the disadvantages of small rural schools, few policy-makers have tested these assumptions in order to determine whether or not the supposed disadvantages actually hold true. This is not to say, however, that the research evidence does not exist.

The supposed disadvantages of small rural primary schools, in no particular order of priority, can be summarised as follows:

- small rural primary schools are expensive;
- teachers in small rural primary schools are isolated and lack opportunities for professional development;
- pupils in small rural primary schools lack adequate peer group interactions;
- small rural primary schools are unable to deliver an appropriate curriculum to their pupils;
- in consequence of some of the above features, pupils in small rural primary schools have lower educational performance in comparison with their peers in larger schools.

Are small rural primary schools expensive?

There is a widespread consensus that small schools are more expensive to maintain than larger schools. The consensus breaks down, however, when we consider the conclusions derived from this basic fact. One position is that the extra resources required to run small schools are a legitimate investment in rural communities which otherwise benefit little from government expenditure (Bell and Sigsworth, 1987). If anything this issue has become highlighted in recent years as the importance in retaining the rural environment has moved up the policy agenda.

A second position suggests that the direct costs of closing a number of small schools and reorganising provision can sometimes be as expensive as maintaining existing provision, because of additional transportation costs and new capital developments (Keast). A variant on this second position suggests that the net advantage accruing to schools after a series of closures is, in fact, marginal.

A third position suggests that other indirect costs need to be taken into account, in particular the indirect costs and benefits to a rural community from having a local school (Bell and Sigsworth, 1987).

A fourth position, articulated most clearly by the Audit Commission, suggests that the additional cost of small schools can represent an excessive and unjustified burden on the public purse:

If small schools are maintained where they are not justified, funds are pre-empted to provide an expensive form of education for a minority of pupils who have no particular claim on the extra resources involved. ... The closure of expensive and unjustified small schools would liberate resources which would well be used to enhance the quality of education elsewhere. (Audit Commission, 1990: 30).

We will not attempt here to disentangle the merits of these various positions. However, we will examine the conclusions presented in a report for the Rural Development Council and Rural Community Network. This report examined the factors involved in the running costs of primary schools using figures available from the Education and Library Boards.

The analysis concluded that, on average, small schools did cost more to run per capita than larger schools. In part this was explained by the fact that, below a certain enrolment level, fixed costs remain high in relation to pupil numbers. However, the per capita cost of small schools varies widely largely because of the varying sizes of the schools. In other words, many small schools cost only a little more than larger schools, in per capita terms, but some cost very much more because of unused capacity. A further factor lies in the salary costs for schools. The teaching staff of large schools will comprise teachers of varying levels of experience. So too the salary costs of these teachers will vary in line with their years of experience, but at an aggregate level the impact of salary costs on per pupil unit costs will tend towards a common average. In small schools with only a few teachers, however, the impact of salary costs on per pupil unit costs can vary quite widely (Jordan and Whiteley, 1997a; Stinson, 1998). This issue has been identified already in research carried out for Department of Education (see Department of Education Research Bulletin 4/97) and has been identified as an emergent problem in Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspection reports in Britain (Jordan and Whitely, 1997b).

Thus, the financial disadvantage of small schools is not simply related to the number of pupils, but is closely related to the physical size of the schools and the salary costs of the teachers. It is probably safe to assume that much of the extra space in these small schools is unused or under-used. If this is so then an alternative to saving money through closing a school might be to consider ways of making more efficient use of this extra space. The salary is one that arguably falls within an equity concern, a point we consider further below.

Are teachers in small rural schools isolated?

This issue was examined in a research study carried out in England in the 1980s. The study concluded that teachers in small primary schools differed little in comparison with primary teachers generally. They were as well qualified, had as wide a range of teaching experience and had the same opportunities for professional development as their colleagues (Patrick, 1990). The context within which they worked is different as their classes were generally smaller and were vertically grouped, that is they were mixed-age as well as mixed-ability. Perhaps surprisingly, in view of an

often cited advantage of small schools, the study found that teachers in the small schools were no more likely than other teachers to be involved in local or community activities in their schools' catchment area, and were significantly more likely to live more than five miles away from their school, although this might be related to a change in the nature of rural communities more generally (Wilson and McPake, 1998). They did, however, have more links with teachers in other schools.

More recent research in Scotland has suggested that, far from being isolated, principals and teachers in small schools tended to be 'keen networkers', through informal contacts with other professional colleagues, support services provided by local authorities and formal constituted clusters (Wilson and McPake, 1998). A similar theme was reported in a comparative study of small schools across several European countries where it was found that the quality of the organisation of instruction in small schools was directly correlated with the extent to which links existed with formal and informal sources of support outside the schools (Nolimal, 1998).

The most recent evidence on this issue for Northern Ireland has been provided by McGrogan (1997). This was a research and development study on the prospects for schools clusters among small rural schools. In regard to the issue of the schools' roles in the communities, McGrogan found that about a third of the schools surveyed felt that they played a key social role in their local community. The other two-thirds of schools in the survey were unsure of the role they played in their local community. The evidence presented by McGrogan would suggest that their doubts were related to more general changes in rural community life, a theme already identified in Scotland (Wilson and McPake, 1998).

Do pupils in small schools lack peer group interaction?

Because classes in small schools are usually mixed-age as well as mixed-ability, it is sometimes claimed that children are disadvantaged from a lack of same-age peers. This is assumed both to hamper their social development and to depress their performance by removing competition and intellectual stimulation. Bell and Sigsworth (1987) examined this issue by looking at friendship patterns, and their consequences, in a variety of school types. They concluded that the peer group for pupils in small schools was more extensive in terms of mixed-age and cross-sex relationships than was the case in larger, urban schools. The pupils in small schools liked their situation, and research evidence suggested they had more positive personal and social attitudes.

Rather than suffering from a lack of competitive stimulation, it could be, as the head teacher of a small rural primary school suggested to us, that the pupils benefit from the fact that they are less likely to be stigmatised by others in their peer group for working hard. To the extent that a climate of that kind is achievable within the more intimate surroundings of the small rural school, another benefit becomes possible. (Bell and Sigsworth, 1987: 115).

In a similar vein, research in Finland found that the particular context provided by small schools contained many advantages:

The peaceful country way of life, the positive effect of the environment on the children's growth and the close co-operation between the school and community were considered environmental advantages, while some of the instructional advantages were the small size of classes, the individuality and family-like nature of the teaching, the pupils' independent work, the rarity of disciplinary problems, flexible teaching and ease of innovation (Pietarinen, 1998).

Do pupils in small, rural schools perform less well?

Although there is a widespread belief that pupils in small, rural school perform less well than pupils in larger schools, we have seen above that Bell and Sigsworth (1987) question the basis for this claim. Burstall (1988) also challenges this view and argues that it is based on little, if any, evidence. In one of the few studies to assess this issue in Northern Ireland, Trew (1977) found that pupils in rural primary schools did show lower performance in comparison with those in urban schools, but 'these differences were attributable more to variations in pupils' socio-economic background rather than qualitative differences between urban and rural schools' (Trew, 1977: 147).

A similar theme arose from the examination of pupil performance in the study by Patrick and Hargreaves:

These findings suggest that factors such as the age of the pupils, the ratio of boys to girls in a class, and the abilities of the pupils are stronger determinants of pupil progress and performance than features such as class size and vertical grouping which characteristically distinguish small schools from larger ones. ... Small primary schools are first and foremost primary schools. The factors which distinguish them from their larger neighbours ... do not significantly override the characteristics which they share with all primary schools. (Patrick and Hargreaves, 1990: 121).

The comparative study mentioned above examined whether there was any evidence that teaching in composite classes had a negative impact on pupil achievement. In fact it was found that achievement levels in composite classes were reported to be higher in Norway and Austria, and at similar levels to pupils in same-age classes in Slovenia, Scotland and Finland (Nolimal, 1998).

Can small schools deliver an adequate curriculum?

Research carried out prior to the advent of the common curriculum suggested that the curriculum offered in small and large schools was not that different, despite a widespread belief to the contrary. Hargreaves (1990) found a high degree of similarity in practice between small and large schools. Such differences as existed were that teachers in small schools appeared to engage in more class teaching, spent less time marking and housekeeping, and interacted more with pupils, mostly on an individual basis.

Once the education reforms were in place, however, even sympathetic commentators felt that small schools might face difficulties in delivering the wide range required by the common curriculum, and this is often cited as perhaps the main current reason for closing small schools. However, over the last few years a number of research studies have examined the way in which small, rural schools have coped with the demands of the common curriculum.

In a research study of small, medium and large schools in England, Vulliamy and Webb (1995) found that the small schools had relatively more innovative examples of experimentation with specialist teaching in comparison with the other schools. This was explained by the greater flexibility in staffing arrangements in small schools, the fact that head teachers themselves taught a class, and because local authorities provided support for staffing and curriculum in the small schools. The fears that policy-makers had for small schools were, according to Vulliamy and Webb (1995), unjustified. The fears failed to recognise some of the advantages of small schools, including the opportunities for innovation in curriculum and classroom organisation, strong curriculum planning and organisation because of the close involvement of the head teacher, and the greater ease of monitoring of pupils because all the teachers knew all the pupils.

In other words, Vulliamy and Webb (1995) found that the factors which it was assumed would cause small schools problems in delivering the common curriculum, in fact turn out to be positive advantages that has enabled them to cope better with the new demands.

Some of these themes have been echoed in a study by Hargreaves, Comber and Galton (1996). They found that teachers in small schools were generally as confident, if not more so, than their colleagues in larger schools regarding the demands of the new curriculum. In particular, the fact that head-teachers taught a class meant that they were both more knowledgeable about curriculum orders and more active in curriculum development than their colleagues in larger schools. Similarly, Jordan and Whiteley (1997b) examined OFSTED inspection reports on small schools in England and Wales and found no evidence that small schools had greater difficulty in implementing the national curriculum. Once again, a supposed disadvantage for small schools has turned out to be an advantage.

Why close small schools? The policy issues

The current policy on small schools in Northern Ireland is explained in a Department of Education paper published in June, 1994. The paper called on the Education and Library Boards, and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), to review the future of all small primary schools with an enrolment of less than 60 pupils.

Although the paper did not suggest that all such schools should close, it was indicated that proposals for capital developments would receive higher priority where they included rationalisation schemes.

The paper listed the new demands placed on small primary schools by the education reforms including the need to teach the common curriculum, produce new schemes of work, adopt new teaching strategies, ensure adequate differentiation in teaching and learning, and to monitor the progress of pupils and report this to the parents. The paper went on to suggest that:

Coming to terms with all of these requirements is difficult for all schools but becomes increasingly so as the enrolment of the school decreases. The difficulties in the classroom are likely to increase when the principal teacher who is responsible for the administration of the school (including the day to day management of LMS), curriculum and staff development, the monitoring of the curriculum, and liaison with the Board of Governors, also teaches a class.

However, as we have seen above, such evidence as currently exists would not support these claims. Indeed, the balance of the evidence at the moment is that teaching principals are better tuned into the demands of the common curriculum than non-teaching principals. Despite this, the end of every school year in Northern Ireland brings more closures of small rural schools, and Department of Education reports that 50 small primary schools have closed since 1992.

We have seen above that the 'problems' created by small schools may not, in fact, be problems at all. On most of the areas where small schools were presumed to be inadequate, research evidence contradicted this claim. It is particularly notable that recent research on the common curriculum reinforces this general trend. The main effect of this is to reverse the order of discussion on small rural schools. Rather than assuming they are in difficulties, we need to work on the assumption that the typical rural school provides a wholly satisfactory educational environment. As was said above, no-one wishes to retain schools, of whatever size, that are falling apart. In general, however, we should no longer assume that they ought to close, unless circumstances suggest otherwise, and rather assume they ought to stay open, unless circumstances suggest otherwise.

Ironically, despite the greater significance of rural communities and small rural schools in Northern Ireland, as compared with England and Wales, it would seem that the policy orientation towards small schools is more supportive in the latter. Thus, for example, a report entitled 'Rural England: a nation committed to a living countryside' from the Department of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in London, offered the following comment on rural schools:

...pupils in schools with fewer than 100 pupils on roll, most of which are rural, achieve standards which are slightly higher than those achieved by pupils in larger schools. Overall, the quality of teaching tends to be slightly better in the small rather than the larger schools. On a wide range of comparisons concerned with the quality of education provision, small schools are rated rather more favourably than large ones. ... Many small rural primary schools are of good quality, popular with parents and within easy reach of the children they serve. All the more reason for any proposal for closure of such a school to be scrutinized very carefully indeed before final decision is reached.

In February, 1998, Stephen Byers, an Education Minister in the then new Labour government, released the following statement:

"Closing a village school can be a death-blow to the community," he said. "We have lost 450 of them since 1983. Today, I am announcing tough new protection for village schools to end this stream of closures".

"When a school closes, the village loses a vital focus. Children spend longer travelling to other schools. Young families will come under pressure to move elsewhere. School closures can have a knock-on effect on other services, like village shops, setting up a spiral of decline. This is what we want to stop".

"So we have decided that any proposal by a Local Education Authority to close a rural school will be called in to the Secretary of State for decision".

"Further, Ministers will have a presumption against closure. And Ministers will have particular regard to the need to provide access to a local school for rural communities".

This can be contrasted with the comments of the then Minister for Education in Northern Ireland in a speech to the annual conference of the Association of Education and Library Boards in October, 1998, where he said:

Members of deputations frequently say that the closure of a small rural school is the death knell of a community. I do understand the important role which a school plays in a rural community and the anchoring influence it has on all aspects of life. *Where it can be clearly demonstrated that it is necessary to retain small rural schools*, I am committed to ensure that the best possible provision is made for the children. (emphasis added) (Northern Ireland Information Service, October 2, 1998).

The balance of assumption here lies against the small school, a position which also seems to be the favoured position of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools which describes its 'ideal scenario' as one of one teacher per age group and a non-teaching principal, a scenario that is likely to be common only ever in urban contexts. In practice, however, in current decision-making in Northern Ireland, the factors that seem to be taken into account when a rationalisation or closure option is being considered are largely financial and administrative. Indeed, in a recent case where a decision to close a small rural school was taken, despite an extensive body of evidence of community support for the school, the decision was only withdrawn after it was brought to judicial review.

By contrast, the formal position in England and Wales now is that final decisions on the closure of small rural schools must be referred to the Minister for Education, the local authority has to take into account explicitly the impact of closure on the local community, the authority also has to present a very strong case before closure can be considered and the presumption will be against closure.

In the speech mentioned above, the Minister also remarked on the work being carried forward at that time on LMS commonality:

Equality is at the centre of the Good Friday agreement and at the centre of this Government's approach. There is no valid reason why, in a region as small as Northern Ireland, two schools with identical needs should be funded at different levels. (Northern Ireland Information Service, October 2, 1998)

The inequity in LMS funding is normally tied to the fact that with seven different formulae operating in Northern Ireland (one each from the five Education and Library Boards, and separate formulae operated by the Department of Education for Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools), two quite similar schools could have widely different levels of funding. The purpose of LMS commonality was to redress this fact. However, as we have seen above, the experience of many small rural schools is that the derivation of a school budget which does not take some account of actual salary costs produces a situation where the principals of two small schools could have very different levels of funds available for educational purposes simply because in one of the schools the teachers are experienced and expensive, while in the other some of them are relatively recently qualified and hence inexpensive. The consultation proposals for LMS commonality which were published in 2001 do take some account of these factors in that an element for school support has been included, but this remains within a context where the potential wider role of the schools as a community resource is not addressed.

Joined-up government

In the absence of any pro-active thinking on the positive potential of small schools in rural areas, it may be helpful to identify some benefits they seem to provide. Notably, the positive case for small schools does not simply rely on the strong learning environments they often provide, but also on the potential for joined-up government which seeks to address issues related to the preservation of rural life within which the schools can play such a vital part.

Many rural areas are seeing the steady decline of local services as one after another public amenity is removed. The problem is that each decision is taken in the absence of any consideration of their overall effect, and this is no-where more true than in the case of school. It has long been recognised that school buildings represent a potential community resource and there is something of an absurdity that they are closed for most of the summer months and most evenings. No-where is this more true than in rural areas where schools could provide a central anchor around which the community revolves.

Of course, if this vision is to be realised then the regulations which currently restrict such wider community usage will have to be altered and that will require cooperative work between educational, community and other interests. Clearly we need much wider discussion and debate on how this situation can be achieved and what needs to be done to make this vision workable.

One striking possibility lies in the potential role of information and communications technology in the schools. We have already seen how the Department of Education in England sees Information Communication Technology (ICT) as a key curriculum resource for small rural schools there. ICT also has a potential community role as it negates many of the consequences of isolation and distance, and would enhance employment possibilities in rural areas in addition to its undoubted educational benefits.

The key to all this is finding ways of addressing the needs and circumstances of rural communities as rural communities, encouraging different government departments and non departmental public bodies to work together and requiring all of them to consult in meaningful ways with local communities on ways forward. Undoubtedly some small schools will close in the future, but the criteria on which such decisions are made should be explicit and the role of the community in the process should be clear. Most important of all, there should be a recognition at the centre of government that small schools have served our rural communities well and very many continue to do so. For this reason the policy imperative should assume their retention rather than their abolition, for once gone they are unlikely ever to be restored.

Conclusion

The review period since 1994 has seen more than 40 small primary schools closing. The Department of Education is currently reviewing the policy on small schools once again, but the review has not yet been given widespread publicity and does not appear to involve any level of public consultation. Nor does there appear to have been any systematic examination of the consequences of school closures over the past decade. That this is so is particularly problematic when, as we have seen above, in different jurisdictions many of the assumptions upon which policy on small schools is derived are found to be based on questionable grounds and evidence.

It would be ironic indeed if the future of small, rural schools was to be given higher priority in England than in Northern Ireland, when it is here in Northern Ireland that small, rural schools play a much more significant role in our education system.

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Issues for Further Consideration

Policy

1. How does government policy impact on the future of small schools?

2. How can policies on small rural schools be rural proofed?

3. What is the most appropriate measure for the size of a school in N.I?

4. What is an acceptable length of time that a child under 11 should take to travel to school?

5. How can the decision making process for the future of small schools become more transparent and inclusive?

Community

1. Can rural small schools contribute to building relationships across different communities?

2. How best can local communities contribute to the management of small schools?

3. How do rural schools contribute to sustaining rural communities?

4. How can we encourage small schools to be an effective community resource?

Notes

Vision

"Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society."

Mission

"Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged."

Strategic Aims

- To articulate the voice of rural communities.
- To promote community development and networking in rural communities.
- To work towards social inclusion and peace building in rural communities.
- To support the building of sustainable rural communities.

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