

Small Schools Consultation Briefing for DES Symposium Wednesday 26th June 2019

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The General Synod Board of Education representing the primary schools under Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian and Society of Friends patronage, welcomes the Department of Education and Skills symposium on Small Schools. 79% of the network of primary schools under Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian and Society of Friends patronage are designated as small schools of four classroom teachers or less. The General Synod Board of Education is particularly pleased to note the Department of Education and Skills' acknowledgement of the positive contribution that small schools make to those who learn in them and to the communities they serve.

Small schools are not unique to Ireland. They can be found all over Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, and throughout the developing world (Mulkeen & Higgins, 2009; Quail & Smyth 2014). They continue to serve geographically scattered communities across many parts of the world. We in Ireland have a lot to learn both from international research and good practice in terms of teaching and learning, leadership and State policy. Some jurisdictions such as Finland and Scotland have undertaken more research about small schools than has been the case in Ireland (e.g. Dowling 2009; Kalaoja & Pietarinen 2009; Wilson 2008).

Policies towards small schools differ internationally. For example, Sweden, Finland and England have seen small schools as politically and culturally important to support rural and isolated communities and have taken steps to actively support them (Aberg-Bengtsson 2009; Hargreaves 2009; Kalaoja & Pietarinen 2009). One of the difficulties in Ireland is that we have tended to frame small schools in terms of the costs (e.g. the *Value for Money* report, undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills on small schools caused a lot of upset for the sector at the time it was announced in the Irish context because there were real fears that its purpose was to close or amalgamate small schools as financially unviable). Groups representing teachers and principals have tended to focus on the stresses or challenges associated with teaching or leading small institutions (e.g. INTO 2003; INTO 2015; IPPN 2004; IPPN 2005). While it is undoubtedly important to highlight the challenges facing those

employed in such settings, the lack of more wide-ranging research focusing on teaching and learning as experienced by all members of the school community has framed small schools as both expensive and negative.

International research tells us a more rounded story. The benefits of small schools for those who learn in them have been well documented. For example, Francis (1992) found that children learning in small schools were happier than their peers in larger schools. There is certainly no evidence that children's learning is negatively impacted in small schools and this was acknowledged in the *Value for Money* report (DES 2013).

We need to re-frame our thinking about small schools in order that we recognise their potential to benefit to the whole system. Both England and the United States have used aspects of small school organisation and relationships to benefit larger schools in order to develop more positive relationships that support teaching and learning (e.g. McKinney et al 2002).

Lodge and Tuohy undertook a study of small primary schools in Ireland entitled *Value for Learning*. The summary report was published in 2016. The researchers sought the views of teachers, principals, chairs of Boards of Management, parents and children using both surveys and interviews. 83% of the applicable schools in the Protestant network engaged in the research. The researchers also observed teaching and learning in the classrooms and breaktime in the playgrounds of 11 of the schools. Previous work undertaken in Ireland has tended to focus in particular on teachers' and principals' experiences and the researchers felt that a broader perspective was important.

Lodge and Tuohy's (2016) research found that all stakeholders focused on the positive aspects of life and learning in small schools. They noted the caring ethos, the tendency for there to be a family atmosphere, the relatively limited negative discipline and the limited extent of bullying. Classroom observation showed highly organised classrooms where there was a lot of independent learning by children as the teacher worked with different groups in the one room. They also observed peer learning where children worked together and taught each other.

The research by Lodge and Tuohy (2016) did not gloss over the genuine challenges that teachers, and especially teaching principals, experience. As with the work undertaken in previous years by the INTO (2003, 2015) and IPPN (2004, 2005), teachers in small schools identified significant additional workload, a lack of tailored resources. They also noted the lack of specialist training to teach in multilevel classes. The lack of preparation for the specialist work of multi-grade teaching and its negative impact on practice and on teacher stress was also highlighted by Mulryan-Kyne (2005) in the Irish context and by Berry and Little (2007) in the British context.

Principals noted the additional workload that they (in common with all teaching principals) faced, as well as highlighting the lack of access to supports typically provided in larger schools. However, they also spoke with great pride in their work and in their schools. Both the principals and Chairs of the Boards of Management were critical of the 'one-size-fits-all' State approach to funding / resourcing and teacher allocation models, noting that it was the system and its structures that created many of the stresses and ongoing challenges they had to deal with. A more flexible approach at State level could mitigate at least some of the challenges those in leadership in small schools experience.

Teachers and principals talked about the need to change the mindset from the single-grade classroom and instead to think *spirally* about curriculum. The NCCA's thinking is spirally focused, but those who produce resources and text books continue to create materials based on an assumption that all classes are single-grade. The lack of easy access to resources and materials for the multigrade context is an added layer of work for teachers in those settings compared to colleagues teaching single-grade classes. The reality in Ireland is that many schools, not only small schools, have multi-grade classes. These include growing schools as well as those losing numbers. This is not just a small schools issue.

Participants in the Lodge and Tuohy (2016) research were clear that there needs to be innovative approaches to sharing of resources in local areas. However, they were also clear that clustering or sharing of resources, expertise and collegiality needs to respect the autonomy and integrity of individual schools. This is a concern that would be shared by the GS Board of Education which acknowledges that the model of sharing resource personnel for

example, has many problems associated with it. The GS Board would be most concerned to hear of plans to share boards of management or principals as the individuals would be 'run ragged' and the school or schools other than the base school would inevitably suffer and lose status.

There is a very heavy administrative burden falling on the shoulders of teaching principals in small schools and better supports to address this are urgently required. We are all well aware that the demands of paperwork have grown exponentially and these burden the teaching principals of small schools in a very particular way. The GS Board would hope to see additional administrative supports and a more flexible approach in terms of demands from the Department of Education and Skills to enable the work of the principal of a small school to be viable.

Teachers in both the Lodge and Tuohy (2016) and Mulryan-Kyne (2005) research noted the need to develop specialist skills required to lead teaching and learning effectively in small schools. At present, the only ITE provider that offers a specialism in multi-class teaching and working in small schools is DCU. The GS Board argues that this should be embedded in all primary ITE programmes. Research based on the GUI data (Quail and Smyth 2014) indicates that girls' self-esteem can be negatively impacted by certain types of multigrade situations. Quail and Smyth (2014) argue that teachers need to be sensitive to the need to differentiate as well as to be aware of the gender and age-related needs of their learners in the multigrade setting. This type of awareness as well as the specific skills to address issues for individual learners would be highlighted by focused ITE and CPD.

Part of the stress teachers report arises from their lack of opportunity to develop and practice the specialist skills required for teaching multi-level classes. Teachers also need Continuing Professional Development opportunities and supports throughout their careers. These need to be delivered in a way that recognises the reality of the scattered and remote nature of many of our small schools. Those working in small schools have particular expertise to share with less experienced colleagues and the development of communities of practice for those working in small schools should be supported and resourced both locally and in virtual communities.

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