THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL SIZE AND EFFECTIVENESS

Evidenced based research into the effect of primary school size on achievement and attainment has been sourced through:

- Ofsted
- Department for Education
- Academic research including National Foundation for Education Research, London University, Institute of Education

Main Findings:

Ofsted’s 2009 report on Twenty Outstanding Primary Schools does not mention school size as a determinant of school success. It is worth noting that the study identifies outstanding schools of all sizes. Analysis indicates that six of the outstanding schools are one form entry, nine are between one and half and two form entry, four are between two and a half and three form entry and one school is four form entry. From this analysis it is evident that 5 schools of the 20 outstanding schools (ie 20%) are larger than two form entry.

The Department of Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (now Department for Education) published an article ‘Size Matters’ (12 June, 2009) which argued against small primary schools of fewer than 210 pupils on the grounds of: ability to deliver a broad curriculum, opportunities for professional development, provision of enrichment activities and the efficient use of resources. However, the DCSF made no mention of larger schools in this research.

In terms of academic research, views about optimal or recommended size of school vary widely, dependent upon the context of where the research was conducted. The context of any particular school can be determined by both the country in which the school is located and the associated socio-economic factors. For example, in Poland the optimal size of a primary school is described as approximately 690 pupils (this is over 3 forms of entry).

Craig (2001) conducted a thorough review of the research available on school size and performance and concluded that for primary schools most studies suggest that the optimum size is somewhere between 200 and 500 pupils. However, Craig stresses that the optimal size of a primary school is not just about the number of children attending and claims that many other factors affect the quality of education in schools. He argues that the optimum size of a school is dependent upon a number of variables including its cohort’s relative poverty or affluence. He suggests small school may provide an achievement advantage for impoverished pupils, whilst more affluent pupils may fare better in larger schools.

A 2004 study by the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) found that evidence relating to school size was inconclusive. The research made it clear that poverty and affluence may have more impact on performance than school size.
The Institute of Education (London University) published extensive research in relation to class size (Blatchford et al 2002, 2003) but nothing relevant in relation to school size and school effectiveness.

**Conclusion:**

Available relevant research is inconclusive. The relationship between school size and effectiveness is complex. There is no simple causal relationship between the size of schools and their effectiveness which can be used to determine policy. The most compelling evidence about school effectiveness does not relate to size but is directly related to school leadership, school ethos and the quality of teaching and learning.

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