

Value for Learning: Study of Small Irish Protestant Primary Schools

Anne Lodge & David Tuohy (2015)

Methodology:

Surveys sent to all teachers, principals, chairpersons & 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.

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. An expert advisory panel continues to give input as the study reaches a conclusion.

The survey, interview and visit data has all been collected and analysed. An initial report of the data has been written and consultations with stakeholders are now being conducted in order to explore the findings from the school communities with policy makers, management bodies, support agencies and the DES. These consultations will feed into the final report. The report will be launched in November 2015.

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. Their main recommendations for change were about practical matters such as wanting a bigger playground or 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 schools 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 they and their children experienced. The schools were also seen to be very welcoming of parents and of children with special needs. 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 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.

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.

Responses to the recommendations of the Value for Money report:

The vast majority of all respondents regarded small schools as making a valuable contribution to primary education in Ireland (96% of all Chairs; 96% of all Principals; 97% of all teachers and 94% of all parents).

The vast majority of all respondents regarded their school as an essential part of the identity of the local parish (86% of all Chairs; 93% of all Principals; 94% of all teachers and 80% of all parents).

Respondents felt strongly that the cultural advantages of small schools outweigh economic issues (88% of Chairs; 87% of Principals; 79% of teachers and 77% of parents).

Many respondents felt that bigger schools can learn lessons from small schools (77% of Chairs; 72% of Principals; 59% of teachers and 68% of parents).

There was variation between school personnel and parents regarding possible amalgamations. Regarding amalgamations, the majority of Chairs (71%), Principals (68%) and teachers (66%) felt that these should only happen within the faith sector but only 44% of parents agreed with this.

Respondents felt strongly that each school should continue to have its own Board of Management (91% of Chairs; 86% of Principals; 92% of teachers and 87% of parents) even if federations were established.

Respondents did not believe that clustering would give small schools greater access to resources (61% of Chairs; 64% of Principals; 65% of teachers and 69% of parents held these views).

Respondents believed that the Principal should be on site in each individual school (65% of Chairs; 58% of Principals; 63% of teachers and 62% of parents).

Response

- How does the GS Board respond to these summary findings?
- What key recommendations do you have for supporting the small schools in our network?
- What specific roles may the GS Board have in affirming and supporting such schools into the future?