

# Human Scale Education

History, Values and Practice

By Mary Tasker

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This is the first in a series of Occasional Papers published by the Human Scale Schools Project, a partnership between Human Scale Education and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

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# History

The founding of Human Scale Education in 1985 was inspired by E.F. Schumacher's classic text 'Small is Beautiful' which argues for small working units in industry as a means of personal fulfilment, productivity and environmental sustainability.

Schumacher placed people at the heart of economics; Human Scale Education places children and young people at the heart of education. Small schools and small scale learning communities enable the individual to strive for dignity and self-worth; they also enable him or her to grow in a framework of caring for each other, their community and the environment.

When 'Small is Beautiful' was published in 1973 the giant comprehensive schools that had been built in the 1950s and 1960s dominated the educational landscape. These schools of 2,000 or more students had been built to offer all children and young people the opportunities embodied in the post-war vision of a new and fairer society. Their big size meant that they could offer a wide range of subjects to children of all abilities as well as providing economies of scale.

'Big is beautiful' was not, however, accepted by all educationists. Big schools often required inflexible and

bureaucratic organisational structures that could override the needs of individuals and were often impersonal and confusing places to be in. In the 1970s some pioneering large comprehensive schools adopted a policy of 'restructuring' in order to provide a more personalised learning experience for their students. Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire, Banbury School in Oxfordshire, Madeley Court in Shropshire and Stantonbury Campus in Milton Keynes all restructured into various forms of smaller learning communities as part of a radical transformation not only of social relations within the school but also of curriculum and pedagogy.

By the 1970s school size had become an issue in the United States. Growing disillusionment with the big American high school prompted a five year investigation into teaching and learning led by Ted Sizer of Brown University in the late 1970s. The outcome was the publication in 1984 of Sizer's book *Horace's Compromise: the*

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*Dilemma of the American High School* and the founding of the Coalition of Essential Schools in the same year. This was not a 'top down' reform but a network of like-minded schools who subscribed to the Coalition's 10 Common Principles. The CES Principles were grounded in years of practice and research and aimed to create schools that were personalized, equitable and intellectually challenging. Most CES schools were small – for example, Parker, the school founded and run by Ted and Nancy Sizer had 300 students – with their focus on helping young people to use their minds well. The guiding principle of the curriculum was 'Less is more', that is, depth over coverage, and no teacher would be expected to teach more than 80 students in the course of a week thereby ensuring a personalized approach to learning. The Coalition began with 11 schools; twenty years later there are hundreds of CES schools around the country and the Coalition is leading the American small schools movement.

In the UK there was also a growing disenchantment with the big comprehensive school. The founding of the charity Human Scale

Education in 1985 was a direct response to parental concerns that schools were too big, that the loss of human scale was leading to strained relations between teachers and students, teachers and parents and between the school and the local community. The impressive array of curriculum subjects on offer in the large school had undoubtedly led to success for some but it was increasingly apparent that for many young people the curriculum was both irrelevant and alienating, leading to a sense of personal failure and insignificance. These were some of the points that were made in Human Scale Education's Manifesto of 1986.

By the 1990s, as criticism of big schools intensified, the appeal of human scale approaches to secondary schooling widened. At that time Human Scale Education was supporting a variety of initiatives in secondary schools. They were 'small scale', for example Nurture Groups in Year 7 or small groups working with alternative curricula at Key Stage 3, and as such constituted important building blocks in raising an awareness of human scale amongst teachers and parents. Human scale was, however, still seen largely in relation to pastoral arrangements or 'under-achieving students'; the shift to seeing 'human scale' as a launch pad for a more radical reconfiguring of the school and for transforming curriculum and pedagogy to benefit all students still had to be made.

In 2001 a new secondary school emerged from the Essex salt marshes which was to put such a vision into practice. Bishops Park College at Jaywick, Clacton was the first secondary school of the 21st century to be built on the 'schools within a school' model. Inspired by a visionary founding Principal, Mike Davies, who had been principal at Stantonbury Campus in the 1980s, and influenced by the American model of 'schools within schools' that had developed over the last thirty years, it began its life as a 'three schools in one', 11-16 comprehensive school with an overall student number of 900. Each small school was to be no more than 300 strong with its own head, its own team of teachers and its own teaching facilities.

The founding vision behind Bishops Park College is of a school committed to the well-being of each individual student within a framework of equity and social justice. The design of the school and its everyday practices reflect its belief in community and the equal worth of every student. Students learn in unsegregated groups with small teams of teachers. With a curriculum that is thematic and cross-disciplinary and with a flexible timetable it is possible to create teams of four or five teachers who see no more than 85 to 90 students a week. This ensures that each individual is known well and that through a more personal learning relationship he or she is enabled to learn more effectively.

Bishops Park became a 'model' school for Human Scale Education whose aim was to promote the school as an example of the charity's core values in action. With its history of support for small schools and learning communities and its connections with major charitable Trusts, Human Scale Education was able to raise funding for some of Bishops Park's innovative learning programmes. In 2005, in conjunction with the Centre for Educational Innovation at Sussex University, an evaluation based at the school was funded by the DfES Innovation Unit and published in 2006 as 'Less is More? The Development of a Schools-within-Schools Approach to Education on a Human Scale'.

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In the context of these developments and with growing interest in small schools on the part of policy makers and the media, the Human Scale Schools Project was launched in 2006 as a partnership between the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and Human Scale Education. Two other charitable Trusts – the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation – also provided funding and support. The Project has 36 schools taking part and aims at a final total of 40 schools. A qualitative research study tracking the experience over three years of five of these schools is under way and will report in 2010. The Project's brief is to promote and support schools who wish to restructure into smaller learning communities and develop other human scale approaches that will bring about a more life-affirming and successful experience of schooling for all young people.

## Aims

The aim of a human scale education is necessarily related to a view of what it means to be human. This is a vast and profound area of human enquiry and one which concerns us all. If our conception of what education is and what it is for depends on our view of what it means to be human, then there will be many different interpretations of the purposes of education. For example, to see education in economic terms – that is as a

means of increasing the economic productivity of the person and of society – presupposes a view of what it means to be human that is very different from seeing education as a means of personal development and 'becoming' with the long term aim of an improvement in the human condition. For Human Scale Education the purpose of education is the development and growth of the whole person – creatively, emotionally, socially, morally and spiritually as well as intellectually – and the achievement of a fairer and just society.

Since the late 1980s education has been seen by policy makers and economists as a 'quasi market' and the assumption until recently is that market forces are the drivers of the good society. Thus targets, examination results and league tables all provide the competitive climate conducive to economic growth. By way of contrast, it is salutary to compare this limited horizon with the approach of one of our near neighbours. In 1994 the Norwegian Department of Education produced a list of educational aims which were grounded in a particular view of what it means to be a human being. The Department's six main goals are related to the kind of person that students would be encouraged to become:

- a person searching for meaning
- a creative person
- a working person
- an enlightened person

- a cooperating person
- an environmentally friendly person

These goals resonate with Human Scale Education's vision of education as the growth and development of the whole person, a view that is shared by many teachers and parents. But it is a view that is largely silenced by the official rhetoric of targets, outcomes and delivery. The lack of any coherent framework of values and the incoherence of governmental policies – for example the tension between the 'standards' agenda and the Every Child Matters agenda – has led to a confusion and short-termism that block the reforms needed to adjust to the world of today.

What is needed within the educational community and in society at large is a national debate which might lead to a philosophy of education that is conceptually and ethically coherent. The philosopher John White has made the point that we have entered the 21st century with an educational system based on

'a vision of education that is grounded in a coherent framework of values...'

the values and practices of the 19th century. The National Curriculum of 1988 is devoid of any fundamental philosophical statement of aims and although it has undergone many changes in the last 20 years, it remains as an educational relic of the late 19th century embodying an approach to knowledge and to pedagogy that is rooted in the values and frameworks of a very different kind of society.

## Values and Practice

Human Scale Education has a vision of education that is grounded in a coherent framework of values which informs its particular view of how children and young people grow and develop as responsible human beings. These values are interconnected and when translated into practice make up the experience of educating on a human scale. They are:

- primacy of human relationships
- respect for the individual
- the importance of community

Most teachers would embrace these values and they feature in many school mission statements as desirable educational goals. It is, however, Human Scale Education's belief that they are difficult, almost impossible to achieve in a large school where young people are not known as individuals and therefore their personalities, anxieties, home

**'You cannot teach a child well unless you know that child well'**

situations, favoured ways of learning and many other aspects of their life experience cannot be taken fully into account. The fundamental argument for small schools and a human scale approach to learning is that children and young people need to be known as individuals and not as part of a mass. As the research findings from America consistently show, small schools or learning communities that use human scale as a means of transforming relationships and the process of learning are more successful in terms of student achievement and behaviour. They are also happier places to be in.

## **The Primacy of Human Relationships**

Central to the framework of educational principles that underpin Human Scale Education is the belief that relationships are at the heart of education and that human scale learning communities are the right size to build relationships that educate. As Ted Sizer, founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools and an advocate of personalisation says 'You cannot teach a child well unless you know that child well'.

The disadvantages of the big comprehensive schools and their

negative effect on both students and teachers have been increasingly aired in the media and were highlighted in 2007 with the publication of the Teach First Report, *Lessons from the Front: 1,000 New Teachers Speak Up*. Teach First is a charity that places highflying graduates in tough inner city schools for two years. Two of these new teachers, Max Haimendorf and Jacob Kestner in their chapter, 'School Structures – transforming urban complex schools', found that in a large school it was difficult for teachers to know their students or even each other. Each individual pupil might be taught by 14 or more different teachers because of the dominance of subject departments – referred to by the authors as 'silos' – and the Teach First teachers had responsibility for 187 pupils. As a result students could 'fall below the radar'.

By contrast, in the small schools of Bishops Park College there are no 'subject silos' and each student is mostly taught by a team of four to five teachers with no one teacher teaching more than 85 to 90 students in a week. With these numbers and the time given to planning and evaluating lessons it is possible to monitor the progress of every pupil. Patricia Wasley, Dean of Education at the University of Washington, Seattle and a supporter of small schools, writing in *Educational Leadership* (2002), says 'Students do best where they can't slip through the cracks, where they are known by



their teachers and where their improved learning becomes the collective mission of a number of trusted adults’.

In the American small schools the importance of a ‘holding relationship’ between a significant adult and a young person is widely acknowledged. Thus in the Boston Arts Academy – one of the Boston small schools – each student has an ‘Advisor’ who may also be his or her teacher and also links with home in safeguarding that student’s personal well-being and academic achievement. According to the Principal, Linda Nathan, there is always a ‘holding’ adult in the school who knows the student well enough to ‘bring him back’ and see that he graduates. To quote an Academy student who featured in the Channel 4 Dispatches film ‘The Children Left Behind’, “There’s a lot of love in a small school”.

The work of Heather Geddes on attachment theory and its practical significance highlights the importance of a secure holding relationship for the school student, especially where his or her experiences of earlier relationships in the family have not provided a secure base for emotional development. In his research study of Bristol secondary students who had done well at primary school but left secondary schools with no qualifications, James Wetz identified the size of the secondary school and the lack of a secure and meaningful relationship with a

teacher as the factors in ‘the drama of school failure’. James Wetz went on to make the Channel 4 Dispatches film ‘The Children Left Behind’ which drew on his own experience as Headteacher of large comprehensive schools and his knowledge of the American small schools. In the small urban village school that he is planning he will make relationships the organising principle of the school.

### **Respect for the individual**

Authentic relationships between human beings are grounded in mutual respect. Children and young people feel intuitively that they need ‘respect’ and many social problems derive from a perceived lack of respect on the part of the adults with whom they are in contact. In a small learning community which places human relationships at the centre it is more likely that young people will be enabled to respect themselves and others. When the learner is known and valued, he or she can acquire the self-confidence that is needed to learn effectively and then through the experience of success is better equipped to develop the self-esteem and self-worth that are essential factors in personal growth.

The current focus on ‘personalisation’ and independent learning through ICT could provide a means of fitting the curriculum to the individual learner, thereby respecting the individual needs and interests of every student.

‘Authentic relationships between human beings are grounded in mutual respect.’

There is however some confusion as to what 'personalisation' actually means and the excessive use of ICT could be in itself depersonalising. A small learning community where personal relationships are strong offers to the learner an important counterbalance to the possibly depersonalising effects of the virtual world and enables the student to learn through his or her relationship with teachers and with other students.

If respect lies at the heart of the teacher-student relationship then it is difficult to equate this ideal with the constraints of the National Curriculum. At the time of writing both the National Curriculum and the assessment system, despite recent modification, militate against the self-esteem and confidence of large numbers of young people by condemning them to public failure. The 'one size fits all' approach to the curriculum and assessment reflects the narrow ideology that still governs official policy making and supports a public examination system that is designed to sift out the academically able students and accord them the status of success. As a result large numbers of young people who are not academically gifted 'fail'. For these individuals the notion of respect is laughable.

The work of Howard Gardner and others on multiple intelligences indicates that students can 'succeed' in many different ways. Furthermore, the small schools of

Boston and New York show that it is possible to have a more diverse system of public assessment without lowering standards. Many of these schools have adopted the practice of 'authentic assessment', in itself a rigorous learning process which enables students to submit work for public assessment in a variety of ways – by exhibition or portfolio or kinaesthetically. It also involves the student's family in the assessment process.

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The formal curriculum in schools today – as in the early 20th century – is still concerned with the transmission of knowledge through subjects in a way that denies the experiences and interests that the learner brings to the school. It presupposes a view of the learner as a passive recipient rather than as an active worker. Human Scale Education's commitment to inquiry-based learning and to a more holistic approach to the curriculum does not necessarily deny the value of subjects which embody the Western intellectual heritage to which every child is heir. There should be no dichotomy between these two different points of view.

Richard Pring in his recent book *John Dewey. A Philosopher of Education for our time?* suggests a way in which the traditional disciplines can enlighten and enhance young people's learning without denying or dismissing their own interests and experiences. He writes:

'Schools should be communities that welcome the experiences that young people bring to the school, respect each person's attempt to articulate these experiences, challenge those experiences with other interpretations, develop the capacity to inquire further as a result of these experiences, feed into such inquiries the wisdom of past and present people found in books and artifacts of many sorts (art objects, for instance) and prepare them for facing new experiences and managing their lives in the future'.

## The Importance of Community

*'For the creation of a democratic society we need an educational system where the process of moral/intellectual development is in practice as well as in theory a cooperative transaction of enquiry engaged in by free, independent beings'.*

John Dewey (1952)

The American philosopher and educator John Dewey wrote these words in the same year that he died aged 93. His vision of the

good society was grounded in the democratic ideal and his views on how to live with others in a democratic community are still relevant today.

Human Scale Education sees education for democracy as a basic premise of the school system. All UK state schools would presumably subscribe to the democratic ideal but in how many large schools is it possible to live out the habits of democracy on a day to day basis? If we believe as Dewey did that young people should be involved democratically in decisions about their own learning and in how their schools are run, then we can see how very difficult this is in schools where the sheer weight of numbers inhibits the development of a sense of community.

Many students find it difficult to identify with their school on any deep level. They feel that their views and interests are denied by the adults in the school community and that they have no part to play in how the school is run or how their learning experiences are organized. In June 2008, in the *Times Educational Supplement* a government statistic appeared stating that 21% of Year 8 students had never spoken to a teacher. The sense of not being listened to or of never being asked for an opinion – in fact of not registering with adults as a person – which many young people complain of underlines the lack of community feeling in many schools.

'The success of the student voice movement in the UK is indicative of how students wish to feel involved in the life of the school community.'

The success of the student voice movement in the UK is indicative of how students wish to feel involved in the life of the school community. They want to have dialogue with their peers and the adults in the community, they want to set up lines of communication and they want to have a say in the processes of their own education. Such desires are the natural outcomes of living in learning communities grounded in the values of mutual respect and care for others.

The habits of democracy have to be lived out in everyday experience and the argument for small learning communities is that they enable young people to listen to each others' points of view, to be open to other people's opinions and to work collaboratively together. In this kind of climate they are more likely to be tolerant of individual differences and to learn the values of cooperation and respect which are at the core of democracy.

For many young people living in our society today the school is the only community they will experience before entering adult life. As the traditional institutions of social cohesion – for example, the church and the family – weaken, it is becoming clear that schools are taking on their role. Children are living increasingly isolated lives in their homes, cut off from their local communities and often from their own families. ICT has a huge impact on their lives and may be creating a dependency on 'second

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lives' and other forms of virtual community. The UNICEF Well-being Report of 2007 showed Britain at the bottom of the table for 'looking out for each other' and bottom overall for well-being. Children need to interact and develop relationships with their peers – including those older and younger than themselves – as well as with concerned adults and to experience living and working in a school community based on the democratic values of participation, respect and responsibility.

# Conclusion

## A Practical Manifesto for Education on a Human Scale

Human Scale Education suggests the following eight key practices that schools might follow. These practices are facets of educating on a human scale and were planned originally to represent the eight sides of a fifty pence piece.

1. Small size. Schools or learning communities of 250 to 300 students.
2. Small teams of teachers of between 4 to 6 teachers, learning mentors, learning support assistants who will see no more than between 80 to 90 learners each week.
3. A curriculum that is thematic, cross-disciplinary and holistic.
4. A timetable that is flexible with blocks of time that makes provision for whole class teaching, small group teaching and individual learning. Teacher planning and evaluation timetabled.
5. Pedagogy that is inquiry-based, experiential and supported by ICT.
6. Assessment that involves the Assessment for Learning approaches of dialogue, negotiation and peer review and develops forms of Authentic Assessment such as portfolio, exhibition and performance.
7. Student voice involving students in the learning arrangements and organisation of the school.
8. Genuine partnership with parents and the community.

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