

# Human Scale Education

School Structures – Size Matters

Transforming large urban comprehensive schools into small learning communities

By Max Haimendorf & Jacob Kestner

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# Introduction

by Jacob Kestner

When Teach First decided in 2006 to celebrate its fifth anniversary by publishing a book drawing on the experience of its five cohorts of teachers, a series of meetings bringing together the prospective authors was convened.

In the first of these meetings the writing team decided upon the important chapter themes and then allocated these themes amongst themselves. Max Haimendorf arrived at the meeting straight from school. He was then Head of Year 8 at Uxbridge High School. He had been a Maths teacher there for three years, joining in Teach First's very first intake. I dialled in to the meeting on a bad line from Malawi where I was then working for a microfinance charity. Before leaving for Malawi I had worked as a History teacher at Albany School, a large comprehensive school in Enfield, London.

Max and I had never met but we found ourselves both arguing for the inclusion of a chapter on school structure and we were allocated to work on it together. Whilst the theme of our chapter had been decided, we had not agreed on the case we were arguing for. When we had our first face to face discussion on our chapter's content we realised that we had both approached it ready for a fight.

And so it was with relief that we realized our agendas converged on one word : small.

We both share the belief, forged in our teaching experience, that our schools are too big. We believe that relationships matter and our experience tells us that in big schools it is difficult to establish the kind of human relationships that lead to good educational outcomes. By 'good educational outcomes' we mean not only academic achievement but student well-being. Because our schools are too big teachers don't talk to each other enough, parents are often ignored and students can get away with things they shouldn't. These problems we think are structural: the traditional way of organizing schools stops teachers giving the kind of attention to students that would make a difference to their education. The appallingly low expectations that we have of our young people could be magnificently confounded if our schools adopted the characteristics of smallness.

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This Occasional Paper is an edited version of our article which appeared in the original Teach First publication *Lessons from the Front: 1,000 new teachers speak up* published in 2007. The article explores how changed organizational structures in large urban comprehensive schools can create learning communities that foster more positive educational outcomes. We are pleased that it has been commissioned as part of the Human Scale Schools Project series of Occasional Papers that is exploring issues of size in secondary education.

**Jacob Kestner**  
**March 2009**

## Some Characteristics of Large Scale

### Problems of Thinking Vertically

Most urban comprehensive schools are structured in subject departments. Educational outcomes are mostly measured on a subject-by-subject basis, although the skills that students require for success are often cross-curricular. However, with grades awarded for students’ performance in subject areas, academic structures in most schools are predominantly departmental and vertical. Subject departments are responsible for the education of students as they progress

throughout the school, from one set of examinations to the next.

‘Vertical’ departmental structures can obstruct cross-curricular learning. For example, a Year 7 student will require essay writing skills in most subjects, but vertical departmental structures do not enable or encourage a teacher in one subject to explicitly reinforce the skills that students have learnt in others. Without structures that facilitate a consistent and coordinated approach to teaching and learning, students are often obliged to start from scratch in each subject they study, with the result that they may have little sense of their overall progress, or of how the components of their learning interrelate and reinforce one another.

Vertical departmental structures can also undermine accountability. Whilst each teacher is responsible for a student’s learning in a particular subject area, no teacher is responsible for a student’s overall education. This is at least partly because teachers are trained, employed and managed to teach a particular subject, and their performance, like that of their students, is measured in subject grades.

Where each student is taught by perhaps 14 different teachers, it is difficult to know, let alone regularly speak to, all of the different staff involved. Indeed, only 17 per cent of Teach First teachers agreed with the statement ‘I know who my

students' other teachers are'. Form tutors' and year teams' 'horizontal' responsibilities could counterbalance this but in practice they spend far less time with their designated cohorts than with the students they teach in their subject departments. Moreover, assessing a student or year group's performance at any given point would require consultation with up to a dozen departments and, in the case of a year group, most of the teachers in the school. Form tutors cannot have meaningful information about their 'tutees' at their fingertips because to do so would require an impossible level of regular communication with almost every other teacher. The time required to identify a student dropping behind is therefore often measured not in days or even weeks, but in months if not in whole school terms.

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The following description of a form tutor's day, by a Teach First teacher in north London gives some idea of the challenge:

"My day officially starts at 8.30 in the morning, at which point all the staff gather for a short general briefing. At 8.40 the bell rings and I rush off to my tutor group, who I will keep until 8.55. We have only three morning registration sessions, the other two are assemblies. Altogether the total amount of time a form tutor sees their tutor group in a week is an hour and 15 minutes, but the stop-start nature of these times makes it hard to use them effectively. After carrying out administrative tasks, on days when it's not too hectic I sometimes manage to do brain gyms with them or hand out work booklets. It's only then that I can speak to individual pupils about their work or behaviour, otherwise I have no choice but to ask them to stay after school for five minutes.

For six lessons I don't see them again, then at 15.00 they're back in my class. On days when we have a lot of time, I make an effort to praise pupils individually. However, on days when we don't, it's a 'Well done to all of you for having a good day ... you can go,' followed by 'Pupil X, Y, Z please stay back so I can discuss your behaviour'. And out they go for another day."

## Crushed by Numbers

The problems we have identified in schools with vertical departmental structures are, for many of the schools that Teach First teachers work in, compounded by the sheer size of the institution and the number of students for whom each teacher has partial responsibility. The average number of students in a Teach First school is 1,056 and Teach First teachers in their first year are responsible for an average of 187 students.

There are two main arguments in favour of larger schools; the first is the conventional 'economies of scale' argument. This is based on the fact that there are important fixed costs in running a school and that increasing student numbers will reduce the cost per student. This is an oft-cited but potentially misleading argument. Larger sizes can often generate disproportionate coordination costs, such as those incurred for large numbers of support staff. Even more important than the cost is the tendency for

very large organisations to find that their size obstructs the delivery of the very outcomes they are created to achieve, as diseconomies of scale begin to emerge. An argument for large schools based purely on cost fails to take into account cost-effectiveness, value for money, or the cycle of innovation.

The second main argument in favour of large schools is that they are able to provide a broader curriculum and, by providing access to specialist teachers, a more stimulating and varied educational experience. However, for larger schools this is more often an aspiration rather than something that is actually achieved. Large schools are too often anonymous – stultifying rather than stimulating – and the strength of passionate subject specialists can be diluted by the reality of working through many procedural cobwebs and blockages. Furthermore, a broad curriculum is worthless if it is taught ineffectively and the basics are not mastered.

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School size can also impair a school's capacity to implement creative initiatives, or to respond to unexpected problems. When teachers are managing a large number of relationships with staff and an ever larger number of relationships with students simply to get through the day, there can be little scope for them to become the 'reflective practitioners' they need to be if they are to do their jobs well. Short-termism and fire-

fighting can quickly take precedence. Little wonder then that teachers – and their students – can remain chained to the textbook. In many large comprehensive schools, teachers' time and energy are simply spread too thinly between too many students.

## The 'Ammunition Run'

This was the name given to the several-times-a-day dash a London school's humanities teachers made from their classrooms to the photocopying room on the other side of the school. Crossing the school, the teachers saw a wide variety of misbehaviour in the corridors and, inevitably, they became embroiled in trying to resolve all sorts of low-level disruption. Where a teacher actually knew the student who was misbehaving, that is, where there was a relationship of some sort between them, the teacher would have a good chance of being able to address that student by name and have some awareness of how to deal with him or her in such a way that the situation would be diffused. In turn, the student would be more likely to respect the authority of the teacher.

With the overwhelming majority of students, however, any intervention would be ineffective. The chances of a minor incident escalating were high and the incident would require a disproportionate amount of time to resolve. The increased likelihood of

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such a situation escalating left teachers little alternative but to invoke formal disciplinary procedures. This in turn created a sizeable time commitment over and above their timetabled work.

The 'ammunition run' is but one example of a wider problem faced by large schools with structures that tend towards depersonalized interactions. Teachers in urban complex schools constantly interact with students they neither teach nor know as they move between classrooms, cover for lessons, take lunch duties or support other members of staff. We should not underestimate the scale or extent of this problem: the way that staff and students are able to move around the school and the manner in which students and staff interact, are vital components of a positive educational environment. The primary concern of a school is education and to neglect the kind of behaviour problems described here can have the most serious consequences.

## Relationships at Risk

The effect of the vertical departmental structures in big comprehensive schools, coupled with the size of the school, is to have an adverse impact on relationships that in turn retards the realization of successful educational outcomes. Teachers' relationships with their students are of fundamental importance in their ability to create innovative and effective learning environments. It is also the aim of every school not only to further the individual student's intellectual development but to contribute to his or her long term social and emotional well-being.

A Teach First teacher in an East London school gives the following insight into the impact of the teacher/student relationship on learning.

"I teach a mixture of English and Drama. I see my English classes four or five times per week but my Drama classes only once a week. For my Drama classes if I, or any of my students, are away from school then we may not meet for weeks on end. In this situation it is almost impossible to forge meaningful relationships.

I am lucky, though, as I at least have an opportunity to establish this sort of relationship with some of my students; some of my

colleagues only ever see their classes once a week.

Personally, I do not feel the same sense of responsibility and accountability for those classes that I hardly see compared with those I see on a daily basis. In the same way, none of these students feel that they in any sense 'owe' me anything.

In my short time as a teacher, I have seen many instances of students who I see every working day and who work hard for me, behaving badly and putting no effort into work for teachers who they see only once a week.

Similarly, through observations of other teachers, I've seen students who refuse to cooperate in any way during my once-a-week Drama lessons, working extremely hard in their English lessons with a teacher whom they see every day."

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## How to Create School Structures that Foster Relationships and Promote Learning

It may seem self-evident that the solution to many of the problems that we have outlined so far is simply to reduce the size of schools. However, there are bad small schools just as there are satisfactory large schools. Having studied the research evidence for the relationship between school size and educational outcomes we have found that the studies that have been undertaken in the UK are limited in number and inconclusive<sup>(1)</sup> and that the evidence from the United States seems to point to small learning communities succeeding where they enjoy greater autonomy than the norm.<sup>(2)</sup>

We believe that it is not the overall size of the school that counts, but the size of the learning communities within them. The key to small learning communities is that students interact with a defined group of peers with whom they can develop a sense of belonging and community. This, rather than leaving them at sea to find their own identity in an institution of 1,000 plus students,

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would be a huge step towards overcoming the anonymity that is too often created by vertical organisational structures and the sheer size of many schools. If this were mirrored by giving teachers a defined group of colleagues and pupils with whom to work, large secondary schools could begin to create smaller communities that genuinely foster learning.

Just making schools smaller without revolutionizing the approach to educating students would be a wasted opportunity. Student outcomes can be utterly transformed when schools adopt the characteristics of smallness. Where small learning communities, ideally of around 150 students, approach education with a focus on individuals, relationships and accountability combined with a more innovative approach to the curriculum, dramatic results are possible. Schools with such a focus

might be said not only to be small in size but to have adopted the characteristics of smallness.

## Some Characteristics of Smallness

These include:

- small learning communities that consist of an exclusive cohort of teachers supporting an exclusive cohort of students
- a focus on relationships and student well-being
- teachers as meaningfully accountable for a defined group of students
- teachers engaging in regular, frequent and effective student-centred communication
- students who are tracked and supported with the big picture in mind, with a cross-curricular and psycho-social focus
- regular communication with all parents

## Recommendations

Our recommendations on how schools can achieve the characteristics of smallness are in two groups:

- restructuring large schools as small learning communities
- renewing the role of the form tutor as an advocate and 'account manager'.

'The logistical and organisational barriers that prevent staff meeting together on a regular and frequent basis in order to plan cross-curricular work would be removed and staff could ensure a consistent approach towards teaching and learning.'

## Restructuring Large Schools into Small Learning Communities

In the light of their experiences in large urban comprehensive schools, Teach First teachers firmly believe that creating small learning communities within large schools will greatly improve educational outcomes. Such communities would ensure that students are known as individuals, making it harder for anyone to fall under the radar. Small learning communities would allow for all data on students, including information about attainment and the individual student's wider achievements to be understood and analysed in context. Response and intervention would be rapid and effective. The

logistical and organisational barriers that prevent staff meeting together on a regular and frequent basis in order to plan cross-curricular work would be removed and staff could ensure a consistent approach towards teaching and learning. The leaders of these small learning communities would be given considerable autonomy in order to develop a strong ethos and a framework for innovative approaches to teaching and learning.<sup>(3)</sup>

## Renewing the Role of the Form Tutor as an Advocate and ‘Account Manager’

Within these smaller learning communities, the form and its form tutor would become the basic unit of school organization and accountability. This will require considerable change to both the role of form tutors and the way in which they are held accountable. The form tutor would be explicitly tasked with maintaining and managing positive relationships with the students in her or his form, relationships which would extend beyond the academic to include psycho-social development. He or she would also be responsible for maintaining relationships with their parents on a regular basis so that parental engagement with the

school could be improved and the dispersion of responsibility for communication with parents between too many members of staff could be addressed.

Form tutors would be held accountable for their role as coordinator, advocate and account manager for a class of students – and empowered properly to fulfil this role. They could be ‘line-managed’ within a horizontal organisational structure, which would counter the existing emphasis on departmental performance in many secondary schools.

‘The leaders of these small learning communities would be given considerable autonomy in order to develop a strong ethos and a framework for innovative approaches to teaching and learning.’<sup>(3)</sup>

## Conclusion

We believe that the current organisational structures of large urban comprehensive schools do not do justice to the efforts of the teachers who work in them. We believe such schools should be reformed so that, rather than promoting departmental 'silos' as the main organisational structure, priority should be given to creating small learning communities where pupils are valued as individuals, and where their learning and social development is seen as being paramount. The most effective way of accomplishing this in large urban schools is the adoption of the 'characteristics of smallness'. In doing this, we believe schools will better foster the subtle and complex human interactions that are at the heart of the educational journey.

'We believe such schools should be reformed so that, rather than promoting departmental 'silos' as the main organisational structure, priority should be given to creating small learning communities where pupils are valued as individuals, and where their learning and social development is seen as being paramount.'

# A Practical Manifesto for Education on a Human Scale

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

1. Smaller learning communities.
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 co-constructed and holistic.
4. A timetable that is flexible with blocks of time which make 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. 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.
6. Student voice involving students in the learning arrangements and organisation of the school.
7. Genuine partnership with parents and the community.

## References

- <sup>(1)</sup> EPP1-Centre (2004) *Secondary School Size: A systematic review*. Institute of Education, University of London
- <sup>(2)</sup> Centre for Collaborative Education, Boston USA (2006) *Progress and Promise. Results from the Boston Pilot Schools*
- <sup>(3)</sup> Mike Davies. (2009) *Human Scale by Design*. Human Scale Schools Project. Occasional Paper No 2

Teach First is a charity that recruits and trains high-achieving graduates to provide leadership, motivation and teaching to students in urban complex schools, whilst developing their own leadership skills and capabilities. Beyond the initial two year programme, graduates are actively encouraged to remain engaged with the Teach First mission to address educational disadvantage through the Ambassador Programme. To find out more visit: [www.teachfirst.org.uk](http://www.teachfirst.org.uk).

MAX HAIMENDORF worked in a West London secondary school for three years, where he was Head of Year 8. He was one of the first cohorts of Teach First, a charity which places top graduates in challenging urban schools. He is now Head of King Solomon Academy, sponsored by the education charity ARK, which opens in September 2009 as a small learning community. *Correspondence:* Max Haimendorf, 46a Ormiston Grove, London, W12 0JS ([max.haimendorf@teachfirst.org.uk](mailto:max.haimendorf@teachfirst.org.uk)).

JACOB KESTNER was also a member of the Teach First programme. He taught history and politics, and was Deputy Head of Year 8, in a school in Enfield. He now works for the brand strategy consultancy Promise Corp. and is a member of the Teach First Ambassador Board. He tells anyone who'll listen that our schools need to be smaller. *Correspondence:* c/o Teach First, 14 Heron Quay, Canary Wharf, London E14 4JB ([JacobKestner@hotmail.com](mailto:JacobKestner@hotmail.com)).



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Human Scale Education  
Unit 8, Fairseat Farm  
Chew Stoke, Bristol  
BS40 8XF

Tel/fax: 01275 332516

Email: [info@hse.org.uk](mailto:info@hse.org.uk)

Website: [www.hse.org.uk](http://www.hse.org.uk)

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