

EU CONSULTATION ON SCHOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Submission from Human Scale Education

Human Scale Education is a national education reform movement in the UK committed to small learning communities based on the values of democracy, fairness and respect. Its guiding principle is that size matters and that children and young people thrive in small scale learning environments where their learning needs are met.

Human Scale Education is a broad based movement which was founded in 1985 by a group of parents, teachers and other educators who aimed at creating sustainable alternatives to large, impersonal schools. Patrons include Sir Bernard Crick, Professor Tim Brighouse, Professor Richard Pring and Sir Jonathon Porritt.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the European Commission consultation on Schools for the 21st century.

1. How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competences?

Children and young people learn best in a community where they are known and valued and where they enjoy positive relationships with each other and with the adults in the community. **Size and scale** are thus of fundamental importance. The alienation and disaffection felt by many students in large schools is a major cause of truancy and under achievement and is increasingly recognised as such. Research in the United States that compares large schools with small in terms of student achievement and behaviour suggests that small schools have markedly higher success rates (See *Progress and Promise. Results from the Boston Pilot Small Schools January 2006 published by the Centre for Collaborative Education*).

Small schools or large schools organised into a number of small learning communities enable children and young people, staff and parents to establish the kinds of relationships that are conducive to good learning.

Small *per se* is however not an end in itself. It is an important first step in creating the conditions for an active, collaborative community where young people and their learning are taken seriously.

Other key features include:

- Students learn in **mixed ability** groups so that there is no streaming or segregation of children or young people.
- Students views are taken seriously and acted upon. A **school council** enables the student voice to be heard and this may relate to matters of teaching and learning and curriculum and assessment. Students have a strong sense of 'ownership' of the school and they learn that the school experience is genuinely provisional and open to change.
- Caring is seen as part of teaching and learning and reflects a **holistic** view of the learner. There is no distinction between the 'pastoral' and 'academic' role of the teacher.
- There is a strong sense of **community and partnership** between the school and local community. The school works collaboratively and responsively with parents, families and the wider community.

2. **How can schools equip young people with the competences and motivation to make learning a lifelong activity?**

- **Learning** is essentially a social activity, and for learning to be successful the relationship between learners and teachers should be based on the values of fairness, respect and democracy.
- The **curriculum** is thematic and cross-curricular and enables each child and young person to develop as a whole person. It both retains the integrity of discipline based knowledge and skills and encourages enquiry based project work. There is a focus on active and experiential learning. Students are encouraged to set their own learning agenda.
- **Assessment** is based on dialogue, negotiation and critical reflection and includes what is known in the US as 'authentic assessment' that is, students present their work to their peers, their teachers and their parents in the form of portfolios and exhibitions. An education system dominated by tests, targets and league tables damages effective learning and the life-chances of many young people.
- The **timetable** should be flexible and responsive promoting different types of teaching and learning, including master classes, whole class teaching, small group work and individual learning. Collaborative and cooperative learning are encouraged.
- **Teachers** have planning time to prepare and evaluate collaboratively and to reflect on their work.
- In order to encourage students to see learning as a **lifelong** activity it must be enjoyable and relevant to their own lives.

3. How can school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe?

Individuals need to connect with the rest of the world through global interdependence and by learning about, and living in environmentally sustainable ways. The curriculum and assessment procedures should reflect this principle.

Over recent years, sophisticated digital technical technologies have made new definitions of 'community' possible. Increasing globalisation means that communities are no longer determined by their geographical location. However technological advances notwithstanding, schools have a vital contribution to make to their local community and to community cohesion as a whole. We are committed to the ideal of a good local school for every child.

There are important environmental reasons why we believe it is important to value localism in public policy terms. Increasingly, digital technology is making it feasible for more people to work from home. At the same time, there is an urgent need to address the environmentally damaging consequences of increasing amounts of travel, to and from work and school. We believe that a combination of these two factors will lead to a re-invigoration of village-like communities, with an increasing number of small, human scale neighbourhood schools networked together by digital technologies. Thus localism will become an essential feature of life in the 21st century.

Schools and learning communities need to adopt and apply environmentally sustainable policies such as local sourcing of food, energy audits, recycling and a purchasing policy based on environmental and ethical principles.

4. How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?

We value pluralism in the education system. At the same time, we recognise the challenges, highlighted by recent PISA surveys, of simultaneously promoting equity and pluralism. Unlike many of our European neighbours, in England choice and diversity leads to systems (including schools systems) characterised by class and hierarchy. We agree fundamentally with the principle of equitable access. However, it is difficult to translate this principle into a reality for all families and their children when class still dominates our social structures and when the playing field is so uneven.

The question of equitable access cannot be resolved without addressing other public policy issues, including housing, welfare and social care. There are no magic solutions.

Early school leaving will only be reduced when education meets the needs of a larger proportion of young people and is seen by them as meaningful and relevant to their lives. Smaller, more personalised learning environments in which young people are known and supported as individuals are essential in encouraging young people to continue their education. A study in Nebraska in 1999 explored the “penalties of scale” and discovered that graduation rates and post secondary enrolment rates were higher in areas with the smallest schools. [Funk, P.E & Bailey, J *Small Schools, Big Results: Nebraska High School Completion and Postsecondary Enrolment Rates by Size of School District* . www.cfra.org/smallschools.htm.] A study in New York also found that small schools had significantly lower drop out rates and higher graduation rates. (Stiefel, L et al (1998) *The Effects of Size of Student Body on School Costs and Performance in New York City High Schools in Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Spring 2000, Vol 22 No1. <http://ericae.net/ericdc/ED420464.htm>]

5. If schools are to respond to each pupil’s individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?

As stated above the school curriculum should be thematic and cross-curricular, emphasising depth rather than breadth, on the principle of “less is more”, and stressing the inter-connectedness of knowledge. Within this framework children and young people should be encouraged to exercise a degree of choice in what and how they learn and thus develop a sense of authorship in their learning.

Teachers should have a central role in helping to create the curriculum, and in mediating public knowledge to the personal lives of young children. The role of the teacher needs to be that of mentor, guide, coach rather than “deliverer” of information.

Assessment should be based on dialogue, negotiation, critical reflection and documentation. These should be built into the process of learning and should include “authentic assessment” in which children and young people present portfolios and exhibitions of their work to their peers and to the wider community.

6. How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity?

Schools should be based on the values of respect for self and others, tolerance, democracy, social justice and equality. These values can best be manifested in a school community where each child or young person is known individually and is seen holistically as a person who is capable, creative and responsible. By involving young people actively and continuously in decisions about their learning

and about how their school or learning community is run, they learn through experience the skills of participation and citizenship. A human scale school is a community of learners where everyone can succeed and where everyone matters.

7. How can school staff be trained and supported to meet the challenges they face?

It is critically important that teacher education is taken seriously. Laying the foundations for acquiring the skills, knowledge and understanding of an informed pedagogue cannot, we believe, happen in one-year post-graduate courses (as in England) where students barely have time to think about the purposes, aims and values of education. If the teaching profession is to hold its own amidst the growing decline in trust of professionals and of public institutions, it is essential that those who enter the profession are supported in developing a deeper understanding of the historical, social and cultural contexts within which they are working, and an awareness that various kinds of knowledge help communities and individuals make sense of their world.

Teacher education (and *not* “teacher training”) should not be based on dogmatism and orthodoxies, or on adopting theories unthinkingly, especially when they run counter to experience. Nor should it focus on the student teacher’s capacity to “deliver” pre-determined national strategies. We believe that teachers must be educated to regard teaching as a problem-solving or research-in-action activity during which teaching methods and strategies, formal or informal, are examined in relation to children’s learning and their progress.

It is also that essential continuing professional education is “professional” in the sense that it is informed and actively engaged, rather than passively “professional” through the prescriptive and coercive technology of training.

8. How can school communities best receive the leadership and motivation they need to succeed? How can they be empowered to develop in response to changing needs and demands?

The creation of inclusive learning communities in which everyone - staff, students and parents - are valued is key to their success. The move away from hierarchical structures towards flatter management approaches enable all involved to develop a sense of belonging and a feeling of ownership.

Small learning communities have greater flexibility to adapt to changing times than large organisations. This has been shown to be the case in the business sector where many large organisations have been restructured into smaller units.

In successful business organisations and in successful schools, the individual is seen not as an economic unit but rather as a person with capacities for growth and development.

FOR REFERENCES SEE:

Tasker, M. (2003) *Smaller Structures in Secondary Education: A Research Digest* Bristol, Human Scale Education

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