Small by Design: Critiquing The Urban Salvation of "Small Schools"

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Abstract

Critiquing arguments from the "small school" movement in cities such as New York and Chicago, this paper provides a basis for making sense of the apparent divergence in policies governing schooling structures in rural and urban places. Its interpretation examines the way the urban small schools movement works to valorize (and hence draw support from) the prevailing political consensus, which favors charter schools and standards-based reform. Small rural schools, by contrast, tend to represent traditional arrangements, both in political and pedagogical terms; and reformers tend to see such schools as "backward" and corrupt. These judgments, based primarily on political and ideological grounds, attend little to the empirical findings about school size, which tend to show that small schools confer advantages in all locales to all but the highest-SES students.

Interest in school size has one of the longest histories of any issue in educational research, with leading professional opinion favoring large schools from 1900-1960, but slowly reversing itself after about 1985. Many of the claims currently made for smaller schools are difficult to warrant empirically, but several are comparatively well established: (1) impoverished children have higher achievement in smaller schools, (2) the link between poverty and achievement is weaker in smaller as compared to larger schools, (3) dropout rates are lower in smaller schools, and (4) participation rates in school activities are much higher in smaller schools (see Howley, 2002 for a best-evidence summary of these claims). Smaller schools clearly have some demonstrable academic merit. Much, however, remains to be learned about the influence of size, and a wide range of issues confronts interested researchers.

One such issue is the extent to which newly built school buildings are actually smaller than they were in previous decades. No published scholarly study exists to answer this question.

Stranger still, research on actually smaller schools has been cited by urban and suburban reformers who have developed a strategy known as "schools-within-schools" in the attempt to personalize huge schools. Schools-within-schools are administrative simulations of smaller size that amount to a family of grouping arrangements within existing mega-school schools, whose culture and administration remain dominant. They are called "schools," but have lacked the autonomy and operational distinctiveness inherent in actual schools (Meier, 1995; Raywid & Schmerler, 2003).

The record of success for such within-school grouping efforts is not good (Lee, Ready, & Johnson, 2001; Raywid & Schmerler, 2003). Thinking like a researcher, one would not, in fact, expect that such administrative simulations would embed the conditions and relationships prevalent in actually small schools.

"Small schools" that are not actually schools enact a bait-and-switch routine. Interested parties would do well to bear in mind the distinction between smaller (actual) schools and "small schools" (so-called). *Smaller schools* is the term the present author and colleagues prefer, precisely because it represents a relative concept related to the variability of school size as it actually appears. These smaller schools are schools that are not too large for educational circumstances, and they occupy a size range, say, from about 20 students to no more than 1,000.[1] Within this range, it should go without saying,

[1] A conservative upper limit for school size (i.e., for the *largest* recommended size) is 1,000 students in grades 9-12, with schools at other levels proportionately smaller (see Lawrence et al, 2002). The author and colleagues also typically study the influence of school size on the equity of achievement with

some schools are smaller and some are larger. Smallness is not a particular enrollment or a particular enrollment category. It is a relative concept, and the relative adjective *smaller* captures the fact quite simply.[2]

As a series of replications have demonstrated, schools that are productive of student learning can vary in size, depending on circumstance, over this entire range (e.g., Howley & Howley, 2004). Up to the upper limit, the more affluent the community, the larger the school can be without damaging achievement levels (Howley & Howley, 2004). Above the applicable upper limits, however, the larger the size the greater the damage done to the achievement of almost all students (Lee & Smith, 1997). Very impoverished communities seem to benefit from schools that are quite small.

Of course, it is true that smaller size does not *automatically* or *certainly* make for better schooling. Better schooling also requires human agency. At this juncture, the discussion takes up the influence of reformism—that tendency in American schooling to greet innovation with a degree of gullibility that actually disables improvement.

Reforms, Reformism, and School Size

Reform is almost exclusively about the improvement of human agency, and the currently privileged method of improving human agency is the reform package that "works." That is, under the current regime of conventional wisdom, human agency has

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correlational studies of smaller vs. larger schools, and on the influence of size on achievement with size measured as a continuous variable, rather than as a categorical variable.

[2] Despite such simplicity, the concept seems a difficult one for many people. Perhaps the reason is the inability of most citizens to engage in proportional, or ratio, thinking (e.g., Ravitch & Finn, 1987). Most adults cannot transform so simple a ratio as a = b/c nor solve for c if a and b are known. Without this facility, the concepts of smaller and larger confuse many with whom the author has spoken. They want always to know the exact size of a small school, sometimes to determine if their school is small, and sometimes to make policy judgments.

proven incapable of being trusted to do what works. Under the strictures of this current regime, proper packaging is needed: the reform package that works. The construct of "small schools" has been developed to constitute such a package, though the development to this end has not perhaps been concertedly intentional. It has nonetheless been improvised in conformity with professional norms about what constitutes a proper package (e.g., Cook, 2002, to be considered subsequently).

The package, as it applies to upstart high schools in urban reform efforts, prescribes a particular small size, about 300 students (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Ort, 2002; Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak, et al., 2000). Not all participants to the fray agree on this size, however. Lee and Smith (1997) have developed empirical evidence that the optimal size for a 9-12 high school is 600-900 students (one of the size categories in their analyses). Howley and Howley (2004), however, suggest that a careful reading of the Lee and Smith study shows that 300-1,200 students is the empirically identified optimum, not 600-900. Such an optimum returns one, in fact, to the reality of variability, proportion, and contingency.

Mere small size is insufficient to define the package.

What *essence* defines this *reform product*, "small schools"? How would an earnest, reform-minded educationist recognize a *genuine* "small school" and a genuine "small schools reform package" that might be tested for workability?

<u>"Small schools" and bad habits</u>. The difficulty, on one hand, is that really decent education does not need to be subject to any such tests of workability. *Decent education* presents itself as obviously enriching, liberating, and cultivating of literate habits. Those who enjoy it read, write, and talk with some observable confidence and grace of

important matters. By contrast, *what works* comes into play only when decent education is nowhere evident in a regime of schooling.[3] In this case the question of effectiveness is really a question of efficiency: discovering what can work cheaply among those for whom decent education is not even remotely accessible. The two perspectives—decent education and what works—are not even contiguous. They are literally worlds—cultures, politics, histories, and economies, and destinies—apart.

Urban small-school activists and their research-minded colleagues (e.g., Fine, 2003) are morally affronted by the desperate academic situations prevailing among students in the Byzantine districts that beset the urban poor. In their world (and increasingly the world of public education as a whole), the invitation to argue what works cannot be declined. Political threats to the existence of urban small-school "experiments" are commonplace; to refuse the invitation to subject these "experiments" to experimentation—random assignment and all—means giving up. Many of the threats are political in the narrowest sense of the word; some are more substantially ideological (as in conservative versus liberal); but nearly all are based on the workability formula of finding an economical fix.

The urban small schools movement has inevitably found that it needs to assert a variety of professional practices that might be considered part of a "small schools" reform package suitably specified so that it can be subject to workability testing. The

[3] The federal government is now focusing its research efforts on examining workability, privileging experimental methods over all other constructions of research. It has not discovered much that does work through its What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), the significant contribution of which has thus far been to decide which studies among hundreds examined the profession should heed with confidence. An author of one the 16 studies thus far vetted, however, advised the public otherwise (Pressley, 2004). At this writing, his study had been removed from the WWC postings.

movement needs to do so because it must explain why not all of the new smaller schools "work."

A recent article in the *Washington Post* illustrated the confusion attendant on the bad habits that distort speech about "small schools" within this dicey context of reform workability. The story reported the work of a devoted principal of a new and allegedly more personal high school—a school small enough to enable the principal himself to visit every student's home, some of them several times. Such a practice is so unique among principals as to be unsung, and the practice is rare even among teachers. Surely, this sort of practice must represent the possibilities of a very small school indeed. According to the article,

> The school has some particular advantages that make his job easier: It is still small—1,000 students this year. (Helderman, 2004, p. B3)

In fact, this is a *large* school and not a small school, even by conservative standards of appropriate size.

The *Post* article conveniently illustrates several bad habits of reformism as they deform concern for (actually) small*er* schools: (1) packaging "small schools" as a product (reification); (2) defining a set of essential characteristics of "small schools" (essentialism); and (3) keeping it simple for the stupid (reductionism). The first bad habit has already received considerable attention in this paper, and will be taken up again below, as the requirements for determining *what works* in an experimental mode are addressed.

The evident essentialism addresses the genuineness of the *smallness object*: in this case, the qualities of a smallness object that functions properly—precisely the

concern of urban education activists when pressed to account for why some smaller schools do not apparently "work." At this juncture, of course, pedagogical and curricular theorizing must join the package as some promising set of professional practices. The practices become yoked to smallness as possible explanations of the workability of the smallness object. The *Post* story does not, of course, engage this work in any formal, let alone organized, fashion, but it does in fact push some possible practices, which concern school culture, leadership, discipline, and community—as well as vexingly conflating the concepts of small and large in the quoted passage.

The reductionism here is not the reductionism of positive science per se, but the gestalt of implicitly representing (1) small as specific number, (2) the practices of schooling (functions) as trumping school size (structure), and (3) a unique and entirely idiosyncratic success—an heroic principal whose spouse as quoted in the paper worries about the cost of such heroism—as a model of workability.

This article is singled out for its commonplace properties in this regard, and not as anything the least bit extraordinary, unexpected, or investigative. As a human interest feature, it is typical of its genre: superficial, upbeat, good news. Its story about education (its subtext, in fact) is implicit, conventional, distressingly passive, and, as a requirement of genre, uncritical.

These harsh judgments concern more than the predictable missteps of journalistic representations. American educationists themselves—and by no means only those confronting a politics of urgency (Fine, 2003) in urban circumstances—are universally concerned to announce effective practices, in order to validate the calling of public educator. The pathos of this outlook is substantial.

Surely, all stakeholders should be concerned with the quality of education. Concern for effective practices seems undeniably legitimate. Cook (2002) lays out the purposes and prospects for determining what works, in a theoretical article promoting randomized experiments in education. Writes Cook,

> Experiments were designed to describe the effects of a multidimensional set of activities deliberately manipulated as a package...they are only explanatory if the manipulations are chosen to help discriminate between competing theories or if the processes mediating between a cause and effect are specified and measured; or if effects sizes vary in systematic ways across outcomes, populations or settings. (pp. 179-180)

If small school size is to be a testable reform, it must, by Cook's lights, become just such a multidimensional set of activities as this paper has been suggesting are evoked by "politics of urgency" (Fine, 2003)

The testing must deliberately manipulate these "activities" (with size in this case not comprising a very active activity) as a package. Merely being smaller, in other words, is by no means enough—not by a long shot. In fact, being smaller, from the perspective of reformism, is—*mirabile dictu*—not likely to constitute the essence of "small schools."

For researchers like the present author, who are interested in the structural influences of school size per se, discourse about "reform packages" and "multidimensional sets of activities" runs the risk of deforming the object of study beyond consideration ore even recognition. "Small schools" (the reform package) becomes a container for the "multidimensional set of activities" to become so integrally associated with the package that it henceforth constitutes the package more than the

structural characteristic of size. Smaller school size becomes the expendable wrapper for the package: attractive, perhaps, but ultimately distracting from the causal essences.

Small By Design and Small By Default

In some of the urban accounts of the struggle to make city schools smaller, researchers and activists have noted that they are creating smaller schools *by design*. This is an important observation, in light of the forgoing critique, and one that must be understood in the context of the reformism embedded in requirements for vetting packages of reform that "work." That is, these schools are being engineered, under difficult circumstances (i.e., intensely troubled urban bureaucracies) specifically and intentionally as reform packages.

One must also note that small-by-design schools are rhetorically positioned in contrast to schools that, on such a view, remain hopelessly small *by default* (see Lee & Smith, 1997, for one presentation of this charge). This paper, however, questions the judgment of deficiency based on the absence of a multidimensional set of activities needful to package a reform that stands a chance of eventually "working."

Regardless of the variable practices that might be evident (or not evident) in such schools, the puzzling empirical fact remains the systematic association of smaller size with higher and more equitable achievement. Lee and Smith (1995) examined the influence of school size in light of reported "restructuring" practices reported by principals. Smaller schools, in this study, were found to exhibit higher achievement gains and better equity than larger schools, but were, ironically, they were shown to use fewer

such activities. Structure exhibits an influence arguably not causal but evidently nonetheless real.

Reality aside, the designed features of "small schools"—whatever proponents or researchers may assert them to be—are precisely those necessary along the lines suggested by Cook (2002) for a testable reform package. The exact constitution of the multidimensional set of activities does not matter greatly; the test of workability exists to determine which is causally best, and systematic scientific inquiry into what works will validate or invalidate the activities.

Because "not all small schools are successful" (Darling-Hammond et al, 2002, p. 642), what it takes to *make* a small school successful becomes a compelling research question, but as we have seen, the presumption inscribed by the bad habits of reformism insists that the answer must be "a multidimensional set of activities."

Smaller size is a seeming *sine qua non*, but small size must be joined to that validating multidimensional set of activities recognizable as being within the province of educators in the way that size, a structural condition, can never be. Mere size is too inarticulate. It merely *exists* and is hardly smart enough to do anything, especially to sponsor a multidimensional set of activities.

Has any multidimensional set of activities been validated as constituting "small schools"? The answer should not surprise anyone: of course. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2002, pp. 653-663) offer an impressive set, even a multidimensional set. The elements of this set include the following, after the sine qua non of "small" size (about 300 students in each of 11 schools in this particular study):

- small classes and reduced pupil load,
- advisement structures,

- coherent and purposeful curriculum,
- explicit teaching of academic skills,
- multiple strategies for active learning,
- real-world connections,
- performance assessment,
- flexible supports, and
- collaborative planning and professional development.

The urban "small schools movement" thus comes inscribed with a variety of practices that seem self-evidently good and necessary to decent schooling. The fact that they require defense turns on the issue of efficiency (providing a modicum of decency to the masses at the cheapest effective price). In themselves, however, practices of this sort have remarkably little to do with smaller school size—nothing in smaller size suggests that these things must be done because a school is small.

Overall, one would be advised to recall what John Goodlad wrote about size and school quality 20 years ago: "It is not impossible to have a good large school; it is simply more difficult" (Goodlad, 1984, p. 309). In light of Goodlad's observation, it would be more appropriate to counsel large schools to embrace the set of activities commended by Darling-Hammond and colleagues precisely because smaller schools have better odds of embracing them.

Newly created small schools in gigantic city systems, however, confront a legacy of systemic dysfunction that threatens the start-up of any promising change. It is certainly worth knowing how new small schools overcome the threat, and Darling-Hammond and colleagues' work makes reasonable claims to that end. Perhaps the list is a useful reminder of some of the features to watch for in a good school anywhere. The troubling upshot of the association nonetheless remains that it confounds attempts to study school size by conflating practices with the structural influence of size.

Henceforward, a “small school” properly speaking needs not only to be small (“small is not enough”) but it must exhibit a multidimensional set of activities of some sort (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Ort, 2002; Fine & Somerville, 1998; Lee & Smith 1995).

Urban and Rural Dilemmas of School Size

The difference between “small schools” (the reform package in which schools are praised as “small by design”) and extant smaller schools (extant schools disparaged for being “small by default”) does not rest on theory, conceptualization, or educational design. It rests on a material distinction of locale, urban on the one hand, and rural on the other, and with the dilemmas of life in those differing circumstances.

In rural places, the practical work related to smaller schools centers on difficult efforts to forestall the closures of schools that are *already* smaller than many urban schools. These are free standing and autonomous smaller schools in which pedagogical and curricular changes are in no way confounded with the issue of size per se precisely because their very existence is not a question of “reform.” They have existed for many decades and usually serve as symbols of the local (civic) communities in which they exist. This connection to community is a dimension hardly mentioned among the requirements of a testable “small schools” package designed to engage urban dilemmas. Instead of calling them “small by default” they might better be called, as Swidler (2004) has it, “naturally small.” Where they exist under threat of closure, however, the exist in impoverished communities. Affluent rural communities have been comparatively more successful at retaining smaller schools and smaller districts.

Some leading urban educators nonetheless have a good grasp of the differences and the commonalities of the struggles in both rural and urban settings (e.g., Klonsky, 1995; Raywid, 1999). In general, these commonalities concern the way educational systems serve students from impoverished backgrounds. More typically, however, urban educators who strive to turn a big-city disaster of 3,000 students into four units of 750 students find it difficult to entertain the possibility that such a seemingly desirable (not to say *ideal*) size for an urban setting might be too large in a rural community. This inference is attributable to ignorance about rural places. If, however, researchers responsive to the urban challenge over-generalize their findings to valorize one particular reform package (i.e., very small schools with constructivist pedagogies), they risk doing damage in rural places. In particular, the attitude that urban educational reformers are engaging a valiant struggle, whereas rural communities seeking to maintain smaller schools are merely backward and selfish does disservice to the cause of public schooling generally.

Defaulting to Small in the New World Order

Just as people pursue many paths toward a decent life, schools can pursue many paths exist toward a decent education. Otherwise, both minds and lives will become increasingly similar, increasingly standardized, and increasingly less thoughtful and vigorous. The existence of one-best forms of schooling—optimal sizes, most effective curricula, and so forth—is as improbable as the existence of a one-best type of human being.

Private schools are much smaller than their public-school counterparts. Whatever the fate of the "small schools" reform package or of the smaller schools that prevail in rural places, the private-school devotion to smaller size will *not* be threatened. There, supply and demand keeps schools reasonably small. Taxpayers are not involved, and so their self-interest is not a restraining influence on either capital or operating costs. Those who use the schools (institutions and individuals) pay for them. Teachers' salaries are lower and they are less "highly qualified" in terms of state certification.

These small schools, far more prevalent in metropolitan areas, may in future enjoy an expanded marketplace, as public attempts to provide decent schooling in urban systems founder. There are two principal reasons for posing this prediction.

First, nearly all parts of the political spectrum approve the idea of choice in education. Choice, of course, contradicts the tenets of much education reformism, particularly those efforts that aim to discover and standardize effective practice for the poor. The poor have less fiscal free-will with which to exercise choice. Thus, supplying them with vouchers for some portion of private tuition can augment the base of paying customers for smaller private schools. Many progressive advocates of "small schools" specifically articulate the need for public-school choice and oppose the public funding of private school choice (e.g., Meier, 1995, 2003). This opposition from progressive voices, however, confronts an increasingly difficult challenge, which constitutes the second warrant for the prediction.

The second reason for predicting an expanded private marketplace for smaller schools is that the public project of schooling has shifted away from preparing citizens and toward the preparation of workers. The sociologist Christopher Lasch (1995) argued,

for instance, that plutocracy has shoaved democracy aside in America, whereas theorists of globalization like Saskia Sassen (1995) and Zygmunt Bauman (2001), on the other hand, have argued that global corporations take the role of citizen in the New World Order. Without the imperative to cultivate citizens, public schooling lacks adequate warrant to sustain it. In a society privately motivated by these ends (and not by the civic duty of citizen-hood), increased demand for this sort of schooling is predictable. Under such circumstances, public schooling would predictably become the schooling of last resort.

A final prediction may be worth making. Smaller schools (but not "small schools") could become more common in *suburban* areas. Although many suburban systems engage similar prejudices as elite private schools, concern for safety exists in some suburbs, with mega-schools viewed for good reason as inherently less secure. The author, for instance, recently gave an interview to a reporter covering education in an affluent small city that sought to replace a very large high school (1,700 students) with two smaller ones.

Breaking Bad Habits

In the absence of studies unpacking the dynamics of school size, viewing smaller size as a container for transportable professional practices seems misdirected at best. At worst, it deflects effort away from relatively simple policy initiatives, such as resisting the temptation to close smaller schools where they already exist and establishing autonomous smaller schools where they do not exist, toward far more ambitious and

difficult ones, such as changing the beliefs and practices of school teachers and administrators across the nation.

From a systems perspective, by comparison to the structural influence of smaller size, the expectations for "small schools" are distinctly unpromising. Change of this sort has, at any rate, so far proven remarkably costly and ineffective, at least in the estimation of such astute critics as Richard Gibboney (1994) and David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995). Many of us favor certain of these reforms, but it seems that the purposes of and expectations for such efforts ought to be substantively reconceived.

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