

# **HUMAN SCALE SCHOOLS PROJECT 2006 - 2009**

## **PROJECTS in SCHOOLS: REPORT AND ANALYSIS**

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### **Introduction**

The Human Scale Schools initiative (HSS), a partnership between the Gulbenkian Foundation and Human Scale Education (HSE), has brought the project into contact with a wide and varying range of secondary schools in England. The project received over 1000 enquiries/expressions of interest and in excess of 200 applications for grant aid, of which 39 were funded during the period 2006-09. All the applications revealed the need for a more human scale approach in their respective schools as well as a desire for overall change in the education system. We have been able to develop relationships of varying degrees of closeness. It is on the basis of these relationships of trust that we have been able to hold conversations with head teachers and deputies that have revealed the nature and extent of the changes that have been achieved in their school communities. These personal insights have been backed up by the formal reports submitted to the project by the HSS schools.

### **Innovation**

Human Scale Education's guiding principle is that the relationship between the learner and the teacher is of prime importance in the all round development and growth of the young person and that these relationships are best facilitated in small-scale settings. This not a 'new' idea but one grounded in common sense and experience and corroborated by current research into the importance for young people of relationships with significant adults in the learning process as well as in respect of their emotional well-being.

Today the rationale for the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'factory' school for those whose future lay in mass produced work is coming to an end as new technology and generally accepted democratic principles make such a view of education untenable. What is 'new' about small learning communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the potential for real social and cultural change that they offer. To shift the emphasis in schools from didactic teaching to independent learning, from mass instruction to individual enquiry and from passivity to critical participation is to change the very nature of schooling and in time of society itself. It is impossible to impose such changes from above: they need to grow from within a particular community which is small enough for the relationship between adult and young person to be sufficiently strong for risks to be taken and new approaches tried out. The schools that have taken part in the HSS Project have shared this vision of the future and have attempted to put it into practice in their schools in ways that reflect their particular aspirations and interests.

From the varied range of schools that have received grant aid two major areas of innovation emerged. These were curriculum change and school reorganisation. The two developments are intertwined. The enormous impetus towards change provided

by the Government's Building Schools for the Future programme (BSF), with its promise of new school buildings whose design and architecture can make possible new ways of organising a school and also facilitate new approaches to teaching and learning, produced a fresh vision of how schools might be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of the 39 schools in the HSS network, 12 are committed to whole-school reorganisation under the BSF initiative. For all the HSS schools the underlying purpose in making a bid for grant aid was to enable teachers to know their students better and establish positive learning relationships with them. As the small school research in the United States indicates, where such relationships exist students' overall achievement markedly improves (Boston Pilot Schools Research Report). For this to be achieved it is necessary to move away from the large bureaucratically organised school towards a new system of small learning communities and from the 'silo system' of single subject departments to a more themed or cross-disciplinary curriculum.

### **School organisation: Schools-within-a-School (SWAS)**

Schools-within-a-school, or SWAS, was the term most commonly used by schools bidding for support to restructure into smaller learning communities. As interpreted in the United States this is taken to mean a radical redesign of the whole school making possible a transformation of curriculum and pedagogy. Our four Lead (or exemplar) Schools are all committed to whole-school SWAS and to the educational transformation that small learning communities make possible. Two are already organised in this way – the other two will shortly open as schools-within-schools as part of the BSF initiative. The bids for funding from these four schools were all related to the need for 'thinking time'. New buildings do not in themselves bring about educational change and the charge has been made against some new BSF schools that they are merely 'old schools in new buildings'. As the Principal of a Lead School in Bristol put it, "the resource that is most restrictive in implementing change in schools is professional time and support for colleagues to carry out the essential processes of identifying needs, designing solutions, planning for development and the implementation of change". In the comments of all four Lead Schools on the effect of Gulbenkian funding, this point was repeatedly made: teachers have the vision and the capacity to bring about change and innovation but they lack the time to think their ideas through. The opportunity provided by the Gulbenkian grant made these ideas realisable.

Of the two existing SWAS schools one, on the outskirts of Bristol, opened in September 2008 amidst much media coverage. It is a school of nearly 1,800 students who are now accommodated in seven learning communities. It is built on the 'street' model which makes possible a series of small schools linked by a spacious 'street' which runs the length of the building. The new small schools, named after 'big cats', are where the students spend 60% of their time and this encourages a sense of belonging and a spirit of community. The planning behind this new school has been informed by human scale principles and the school itself was one of the first to be funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation when the HSS project began in 2006.

The other existing Lead School in Milton Keynes has 2,600 students on roll, making it one of the largest schools in the UK. The students live in five 'halls' of around

500 students each. These are in effect separate schools each with a distinct ethos and identity. (It could be argued that 500 is no longer a 'small' learning community. It is encouraging to note that the school is shortly to receive major funding from a commercial partner which will pay for a new building and possibly prompt a re-evaluation of the ideal size for the Halls.) The school has been linked to Human Scale Education since the early 1990s and its values and practices reflect those of HSE. The school's Strategic Plan for 2009 – 2013 states that 21<sup>st</sup> Century developments "should ensure that the buildings are designed to deliver the school's educational and social objectives, including human scale practices that allow individuals to develop in a culture of mutual respect and affection"

The third Lead School, in South London, has found inspiration in the design and organisation of Hellerup School in Copenhagen where so-called Home Bases within a large school accommodate 90 students each. The purpose of the school's bid for Gulbenkian funding was to develop its vision for a new human scale school. This involved 'research time' which included visits to SWAS schools in the USA with the HSS team, to Denmark and to other UK schools. Grant aid was also to be used for 'advancing the skills of our teaching staff'. In 2010 the school will move to a new-build site where the SWAS principle will be applied in the first instance to children in Years 7 and 8. This small learning community will be the model for the eventual reorganisation of the whole school as 'three schools within a school'. The impact of this reorganisation of the school's curriculum and pedagogy will be explored in the next section.

A radically different approach to restructuring a school is being taken by the fourth Lead School in the North East of England. With the opening of the school in 2011, that will incorporate three schools within a school, the vision of students working in small defined communities that engage its members in supporting each other in a 'family environment' is achievable. For this to work the learning process needs to be personalised and needs to involve the home environment. To this end the school is setting up a virtual learning community making use of on-line communication. The local City Council has invested in wireless broadband to service the school community, providing free broadband access to all homes and families in its catchment area. The Gulbenkian funding was used to pay for staff time needed to build up an exemplar bank of materials and learning approaches. A pool of learning resources consisting of print material, CD-Rom, DVD, wikis, learning clips (video and audio) and blogs has been created by staff and students together. The purpose is to extend access to learning through the 'real' small learning communities, making available to all students different modes of learning. The process is ongoing as staff and students co-construct further resources. The grant also enabled the Head of ICT at the school to train other staff, parents and governors as well as students in how to use these resources. The school's bid emphasised the need to establish a culture of working within a virtual community. This cultural shift has emerged from the successful practical steps taken and the head teacher is now confident that this will support the work of the new small learning communities to be established in 2011.

The HSS schools network covers a continuum of schools engaged in the journey to reorganisation. In making their bids for funding some schools did not envisage a whole school approach while others were well on the way. In the latter category one large Midlands school has subdivided into two smaller learning communities, adopting a campus-style design. This has been achieved in the face of 'many battles with the PFI company paying for the school which wanted to build a standard large school'. The Gulbenkian grant made a difference to these battles by providing some of the 'start-up' costs of the new learning centres. It also contributed towards staff development activities designed to develop a sense of belonging among the students to their new learning centres. This is a school whose whole approach to curriculum and pedagogy has been transformed by the initial division of the school into smaller units.

Amongst the schools not committed to whole-school SWAS were those seeking funding for the creation of small learning communities in Year 7 designed to ease the transition from primary to secondary education. The HSS grant was used to provide extra staffing for these groups as well as funding for the professional development needed to set up a new curriculum. In some areas of extreme deprivation - and a fair number of HSS schools fell into this category - Year 7 was subdivided into an even smaller groups where problems of illiteracy, innumeracy and emotional upset could be addressed more effectively. At one school in Kent this kind of grouping was known as a 'pathway': children were divided into four separate pathways according to their academic and emotional needs. This particular school sees pathways, however, as the first move towards a whole school SWAS. Again, teachers at a school in the North East of England in an area of high unemployment maintained that the effect of a human scale grouping was hugely beneficial to the children who had been selected to form a 'nurture' group. While all the funded projects that set up small learning communities for Year 7 children reported noticeable gains in academic achievement, in self esteem and in more positive attitudes to school, it is Human Scale Education's belief that all children and young people benefit from the warmth, support and attention to individual needs that a small learning community makes possible.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

The reorganisation of schools into small learning communities provides a springboard for innovation in curriculum and pedagogy. As a first step towards change most schools recognised the human scale principle that for student learning to flourish a positive relationship between student and teacher is fundamental. The majority of bids made to the Gulbenkian Foundation were, therefore, for the kind of curriculum change which would enable teachers to spend more time with groups of students so that the personal relationships needed to build confidence in the learner could develop. One head teacher made the point that the small learning community is essential for engendering relationships that lead to trust." Many of our students come from environments where they don't trust relationships - unless you can build up relationships where there can be a level of trust, you will get nowhere". Many schools now recognise that the traditional subject-centred curriculum sets up a system where this kind of relationship building is impossible as teachers may see up to 150 students

in the course of a week while students may see 15 different teachers. The Coalition of Essential Schools in the US states as one of its key principles that in the course of a school week no teacher should see more than 80 to 90 students and no student should see more than 6 teachers. While no HSS school has yet been able to put this principle into practice many are trying to move in that direction. The adoption of a cross-disciplinary or themed curriculum enables teachers to see the same group of students for a much greater proportion of the week.

In the field of curriculum and pedagogical change the HSS schools ranged from modest attempts in Year 7 to introduce 'Learning to Learn' days (which resembled the project work approach of the primary school) to whole-school curriculum change. The unifying factor in all these bids was that the curriculum should centre on the student's interests, skills and style of learning rather than on 'subject delivery'; and that pedagogy should be enquiry-based rather than didactic. The process of change begins in Year 7 and several of the bids sought grant aid to develop a new thematic Year 7 curriculum which would form the first stage in changing the curriculum right through to Key Stage 4. At one school in Tameside the grant support enabled the school to develop a new curriculum based on the RSA's Opening Minds competences curriculum. The school is now planning the Year 8 curriculum along similar lines. The grant paid for staff planning days, a residential staff conference, visits to other schools and the purchase of materials. Reporting on progress in February 2009 the head teacher of this school observed "During the rest of the academic year we will continue to spend the grant money to allow staff to work together on the new curriculum and to support the Curriculum Change group with their whole-school focus on pedagogy and learning space design" This was a school whose curriculum five years ago was indistinguishable from that of a traditional grammar school which, in the words of the Head teacher, "did not serve the vast majority of our students well". Now, inspired by visits to Hellerup School in Denmark and to the Boston and New York small schools, his school -which is scheduled for a rebuild under BSF in 2010 - will have a "curriculum that will equip students for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

Many of the schools applying for help in developing a new curriculum were influenced by the Opening Minds curriculum alluded to above. The 'skills' structure of this curriculum provided a useful conceptual framework while the curriculum materials offered a starting point for schools to develop similar resources of their own. Some schools developed their own philosophical and pedagogical ideas as a result of their own research. One of the Lead Schools provided details in their report of the three 'Research Strands' which led to their innovative curriculum and to pedagogical strategies that they plan to take forward to their new BSF school in 2010. In this school Gulbenkian funding supported professional development in the following areas:

- Students' different learning styles
- Assessment for Learning, focusing on peer and self-assessment
- Developing thinking skills in the classroom

The 'thinking time' that the grant made possible was highly focused and the success of the Year 7 curriculum was a deciding factor in this school becoming an HSS Lead School.

This school's vision of the future is worth quoting at this point. "Making breakthroughs in learning and classroom pedagogy is a priority and we continue to build on our own sense of enquiry as life-long learners who want the very best for our students. We are on a journey that sees a change in the mind-set of us all – a change where subjects no longer have specified topics or boundaries; where the teacher is a learner as well as the student; where the classroom has no fixed furniture; where the students make choices in what and how they learn. In doing this we aim to give each student the skills and confidence to be successful in all walks of life as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is not an easy journey. Much of our work is experimental. However, given the amount of research and investigation that we have absorbed, we are confident about the likely success of the route we are taking."

Traditionally large secondary schools have divided their activities into two areas: curriculum and pastoral. Bureaucratic management structures have evolved to support both. In the vision outlined above these two functions of a learning community would be integrated in a holistic learning experience for each individual student. This is the case in many American small schools where teachers care for the students' academic and pastoral needs, each student having in addition an Adviser who is also his or her teacher. At Hellerup in Copenhagen a small team of teachers takes responsibility for all the students' needs. Amongst the HSS schools there were several attempting to loosen up the traditional curriculum/pastoral division by means of vertical tutor groups, Learning Guides and house systems. A large school near London used the Gulbenkian grant to break down the traditional tutor group of 30 into mixed age groups of 15 with older students supporting younger ones both in a curriculum and pastoral sense. It planned to involve all the staff including technicians, caretakers and librarians in the scheme. The Bristol Lead School received Gulbenkian funding to develop its Year 7 cross-curricular themed curriculum and, during 2007-2008, ran a major CPD programme to develop the skills and expertise of the Learning Guides. All staff will become Learning Guides (including Support and Administrative staff) and will care for groups of students with a ratio of one adult to 10 learners.

For changes in curriculum and pedagogy to become embedded in schools there needs to be student involvement. Co-construction of the curriculum - that is, teachers and learners sharing in the construction of the learning process – was stated as an objective by several schools applying for funding. In virtual learning environments (VLEs), as in the HSS school in the North East, this is being achieved, perhaps because for many young people ICT is a natural medium. For students to exercise choice in what and how they learn, and for enquiry-based learning to really work, students need to be confident learners. Small learning communities which build confidence, as well as approaches to teaching and learning which respond to individual student's interests and talents, have the potential to form the basis of a more student-led curriculum. Fundamental to this shift is the nature of assessment.

Assessment for Learning assessment procedures, like peer and self-mentoring, were highlighted in several school's applications. But the more radical approaches were on line. To quote from the Bristol Lead school application: "Assessment will be done through analysis of digital portfolios , peer and self- assessment and authentic tasks which are presented to parents, learning guides and the directors of the small learning communities. Students will maintain their own learning logs, identifying strengths and areas for development with their peers." In the American small schools, 'authentic assessment'- which requires students to display their work through portfolios of written and visual material and exhibitions within the school community and to parents and carers – has been shown to have a liberating effect on students' attitude to learning.

### **How sustainable are these changes?**

In reporting on the effects of the Gulbenkian grant, many schools commented on the positive outcomes of staff working in cross-curricular teams. But they also commented on the difficulties of changing the mind-set of staff. Two interesting approaches were reported. The application for grant aid from one school which follows the RSA Opening Minds curriculum was actually based on ensuring the sustainability of an innovative curriculum. The head teacher used the grant to help develop a collegiate model of management which would replace the old hierarchical model of school management. Cross-curricular groups of teachers would work with each other, mirroring the way that students work, and develop the ability to act autonomously in the interests of the learner at the point of contact. The guiding principle is that all professionals are equal in status albeit in different degrees and areas of experience. This cultural shift is reported to have succeeded. At a less ambitious level another school wanting to embed cross-curricular thinking identified a 'seed group' of creative and innovative teachers whose influence in the teaching teams set up to change the curriculum students was crucial. At this school the effect of the Gulbenkian grant was to drive forward "the development of human scale education in smaller learning communities as an on-going project that will be shaped and developed by students and staff with no time limit".

### **How do we move on?**

While a large number of the schools in the HSS network have fulfilled many of the aspirations expressed in their grant applications, it has been noticeable that there is still much to be done in the area of teaching and learning methods. With the removal of KS3, schools now have the opportunity to visualise other ways of evaluating student's work which would in turn transform ways of learning. While curriculum change has taken place in most of the schools in the HSS network, it has to be said that many of the new curriculum offers have been designed by school staff, or by outside curriculum developers, and students have played little or no part. For many learners there is therefore little difference between a subject-centred curriculum and a supposedly child-centred curriculum since they have shared in the construction of neither. As a result many students remain passive learners uninvolved in the issues or themes that have been decided for them. For active enquiry-based learning to develop students need to be encouraged to say what they want to learn and how

they want to learn it. Enabling students to observe lessons and then to discuss the lesson with the teacher and their peers raises the status of students to that of 'learning partners' as well as helping them to identify the kind of learning strategies which best suit them. This is an area of fundamental change that is just beginning to emerge.

### **Dissemination**

A quote from the head teacher of an HSS Lead School perhaps holds the key. "It is our intention to offer multiple opportunities to others to visit and join us on our journey. We would also like to complete a formal twinning with Boston Arts Academy or one of the New York schools to share our learning between staff and groups of students. Our website will become an area of information gathering and also a location for discussion groups. It is not our intention that we become a model for all to follow but that we continue to work in partnership with other organisations so that the experience for more students is predicated on the principles of human scale education within a small learning community context".

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