

Human Scale Education

Learning, Design and
Human Scale Education

By Mike Davies



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In recent years Mike Davies has worked mainly on school transformation within the Schools for the Future programme. This, linked with his other main area of interest – the reorganisation of schools on human scale lines – grew from his experience as a Headteacher of a number of schools in England and Scotland. The schools were mainly in economically deprived and challenging communities, each with an emphasis on supporting human scale practices in relation to curriculum design and development, pedagogy, the use of time and space, staff and student organisation and relationships.



Introduction – size matters

In England schools can theoretically expand or contract in size in accordance with parental preference. It is a contemporary paradox that while parents constantly say that they value the relationships of smaller schools and the personalisation that stems from a more intimate knowledge of the person and learner, thus reflecting the guiding principles of Human Scale Education, they have also consented to the building of larger and larger schools.

Many of these new large schools have rationalised provision on the grounds of efficiency and improving data at specified times in a child's life, yet we also know that:

- Pupils feel less engaged with larger schools.
- Teachers feel less happy with the climate in larger schools.
- The curriculum is 'delivered to' rather than 'constructed between' learners.
- Some kinds of violent behaviour rise as school size increases while other kinds of violent behaviour increase as school size decreases¹

A report in the Daily Telegraph in 2009 suggested that larger schools are becoming the norm; it reported that 'Figures show the number of "titan" schools with more than 2,000 pupils has more than quadrupled from six a decade ago to 25 last year. At the same time, the number with 1,500 to 1,999 pupils increased from 132 to 263.'² There are, though, signs that the tide is turning, that we might be through

the worst and that students, parents and staff might again be able to connect and use the special relationship that a school can build in serving its local community. There is hope that the voices of parents and teachers are being listened to and that students might escape from the worst of C20th factory regimes and rigidity. We also have to take care that the 'one size fits all' ideology so brilliantly encapsulated by the Thatcher government's nationalisation of the curriculum in the 1990's, is not equally matched by letting a 'thousand flowers bloom' in the interests of a burgeoning and unfettered choice that was apparent at the end of the Brown government in 2010.

In relation to size, a vivid example of what we might just have avoided was illustrated by an article in the Guardian newspaper at the beginning of the new term at the brand new Nottingham Academy in 2009.

Nottingham Academy has 20 classes in each year where most secondaries have six, and it will get through 105,000 exercise books a year instead of the 35,000 consumed by an average school. At its peak, the canteens will serve about 1,700 meals every day – three times as many as any normal school. To walk the length of the school, across the three campuses it needs to house 3,600 pupils, takes nearly an hour.

The size of the school – it will become the largest in Europe – has raised concerns that the intimacy of teacher-pupil relationships in the classroom will be lost with a student body that runs into the thousands.³

Later in the same article Andrew Barnett, director of the Gulbenkian Foundation which is campaigning for smaller schools through its support of Human Scale Education, said: “It is self-evident that large

schools need to be broken down into smaller learning communities if students are to stand a chance of knowing the teachers who teach them or to develop any sense of pride in the schools they attend.” Vernon Coaker, the schools minister at the time, made it clear that the government was not intending to introduce schools of this size across the country. Nevertheless the Building schools for the Future programme, whether relating to Local Authorities or Academies, has seen a significant rise of, and acceleration towards, larger schools.

In relation to the Labour Government’s investment in public education and renewal, it was not the schools minister’s comment on size that drew attention but his assertion that “All I want is to see is schools that work.” This innocuous comment masks the difficulty that beset the BSF programme as it thrust towards ‘transformation’.

Titan Schools – organisation on the old factory model in an era of personalisation:



Crowd control – 1/15th of the students at Nottingham Academy



Lining up – the welcome at Mossbourne Academy

Building Schools for the Future – transformation

Launched by the Labour Government's Department for Education & Skills in February 2004, the Building Schools for the Future Programme (BSF) represented the largest and most ambitious scheme of its kind anywhere in the world.⁴ With an estimated budget of between £52-£55 billion it set out to renew all 3,500 English secondary schools over the 15 year period 2005-2020. It planned to entirely rebuild half the school estate, structurally remodel 35 per cent, and refurbish the rest. However, at every opportunity the government stressed that BSF was far more than just a building programme.

BSF is a programme of unprecedented scale and vision. Its ultimate goal is to transform education for every young person and teacher in the country... As well as being a project to improve radically the fabric of school buildings... it has been explicitly designed to transform the educational experiences of pupils.⁵

If the rhetoric is to be believed design was being employed within BSF not only to effect physical change but also to engage with, and facilitate wider transformation.

What remains undefined and unclear is any definition of transformation. To quote Rudd again:

We can only really say transformation will have been achieved if we see marked changes in approaches to learning, teaching practices, relationships and school organisation... where what is learnt, by whom, when, who with and how becomes more fluid, emergent and evolves based on need and opportunity.

Despite being over five years and many billions of pounds into the programme, the third annual report on BSF by PricewaterhouseCoopers stated that there remained 'no specific agreed definition of what constitutes educational transformation... [suggesting that] schools, in particular, need a greater level of clarity on what educational transformation is'.⁶

Without such clarity and consensus as to what it is to be an educated citizen in the C21st we might find it difficult to articulate the added value and new learning that can be the achieved in either of the 'classrooms' shown opposite.

At a macro level some of the possible competing perspectives are summarised in the diagram on page 6. Essentially we have new designs and new buildings without any clarity of purposes or vision of a future that they part of.



Thomas Deacon Academy, Peterborough, UK



Dongzhong School, Miao, China

There has been an absence of debate and subsequent building of consensus around what is the 'transformation' that BSF wanted to achieve.



At its most fundamental, is the school system about:

- passing on to the next generation a distillation of the main ideas and knowledge that are seen to underpin society?
- or is it focused on developing a skilled workforce to enhance economic prosperity?
- or is it more about creating a socially cohesive and tolerant society?
- or is it about identifying individual strengths and talents and developing these as specialist abilities rather than fostering a broad and balanced citizen?
- or is about fostering a creative, curious and restless lust for innovation irrespective of the challenge this presents to current mores and institutions?

It is likely to be all of these and more, but in what proportions and

in what priority? In the absence of clarity there is a danger that we are building elegant buildings bereft of purpose and meaning – new, old schools.

Human Scale Education – transformation

Human Scale Education [HSE] is passionate about scale but as with the over identification of the Green Party with 'ecology' so 'scale' for HSE runs the risk of becoming its sole defining characteristic. Scale for HSE is the enabler for a radical transformation and a robust renewal. In the case of HSE this significantly relates to new forms of learning and assessment and issues of identify and belonging.

In essence, at the heart of HSE there is a strong recognition of the primacy of human relationships, respect for the individual and centrality of community as exemplified through:

- Democracy and participation
- Collaboration and co-construction
- Social justice, belonging, identity and equity
- Restorative justice, dialogue, dignity and self esteem
- Respect for diversity and pluralism
- Opportunities to discover, be inspired, refine talents and discover new ones
- Sustainability and sensitivity

An insight into how the above ideals might be lived in practice, and an illustration of the approaches that HSE is interested in further developing, can be gained by comparing the two school scenarios sketched below.

Scenario One: Learning at Ramsey

Students at Ramsey arrive early for one of the many sports sessions or for a bacon sandwich at the breakfast club.

On entering the school building student's swipe in using their personal smart card to sign into the flex time base of their own small school. Until the first student conference at about 8:30 everybody works on their personal project or any other assignments agreed upon with their tutor. Each of the small schools has its own LRC, the Campus library is now mainly fiction, plus some ICT resources that are shared with the wider community.

During the first conference the students individually discuss with their mentor/tutor how they are getting on with their personal project, they seek ideas on improvement and ask for any guidance or help to deepen their understanding and ease them into the day.

The students work through the day using the teachers as advisers and consultants in

relation to their individual projects. The close adjacency of a wide variety of resources enables the student to discover/create/make/investigate the topic of their inquiry in a medium that best extends their skills and acts as a catalyst to display their talents. To support the project work an appropriate range of long and short courses are available to extend understanding and broaden experience/interests. Some take the form of a "knowledge fix" from a specialist, a time when the whole group needs to understand an idea or principle to resource them for the task in hand. These sessions are timetabled in a traditional way, but students opting to attend do so on the basis of need and interest rather than age and compulsorily compliance.

After a flexible lunch break the second conference takes place. During this conference every student, within their learning group, tells about the good and poor experiences they might have had in relationship to their projects. This conference is about peer sharing and support and is meant to give everybody some good ideas for their own work and make sure that all students are well informed and supported by their community. These sessions legitimise the idea of struggle and quest, they encourage 'risk' and offer both scaffolding and a safety net.

Before the end of this conference all students know what to do for the rest of the day and in the flexi time the following morning.

Institutional arrangements, barriers and control have been minimised. Ramsey works with the rhythm of youth. The students can choose when to leave school, taking in consideration the compulsory number of weekly hours. Many stay to use the resource/café area, or enjoy sport or elect to study at arrange of more formally organised courses.

Scenario Two: Learning at Skomer

Students arrive at Skomer School ready to go to registration at 8.30. By this time a small group of students will have had breakfast and met a youth worker, who comes in early every morning. She is funded by a grant given to young people through the local multi agency team, which has its base in the school.

The 'school bleeper' sounds at 8.30 when all students go to their tutor groups for the first twenty minutes each day. On two days a week there are Year Group assemblies in the Hall. During 'Registration', homework diaries are checked and any absences followed though.

At 8.50 the bleeper sounds and students make their way to the first lesson of the day. Each lesson lasts for 60 minutes and there are 5 per day. The young people make their way around the school following their timetable that takes them through a number of subject areas, as defined by the National Curriculum. While tutor groups are scattered around the school, with year groups coming together just twice a week for assembly, faculties and their associated departments, are grouped very tightly together in suites of rooms. As far as possible the policy of the school is for each teacher to have their own room and be responsible for it.

Skomer School is very proud of the investment it has made in Interactive White Boards and their use, based on careful departmental planning, has made for greater consistency of approach across the teaching force. Rooms are set out to maximise this direct teaching approach. Many of the instructional programmes developed by the school are available by the school's VLE out side of lesson times and for home use.

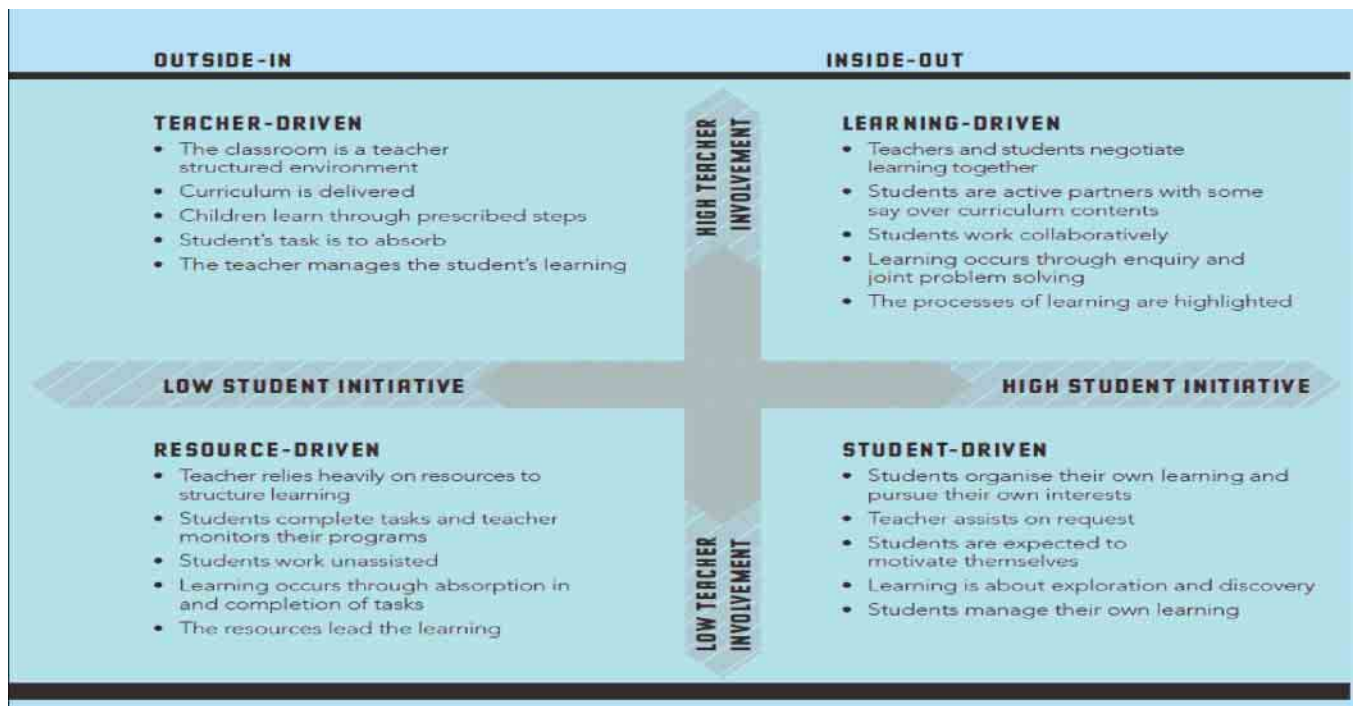
The school day follows its pre set pattern with a break for 20 minutes in the morning and a 50 minute lunch break. All eating takes place in the dining area, where despite a rota of 'lunch

sittings' many students spend much of their time in queues.

Sports facilities at the school are regarded as very good and extensive use of these is made by a series of clubs that run on three nights of the week. These are also available for community use in the evenings and on Saturday mornings.

The experience of students at Ramsey and Skomer is clearly very different. At Skomer the emphasis is much more student centred, embodying an experience which has much more to do with empowerment and participation, engaging with issues that resonate

deeply with the students and the opportunities and challenges they face in contemporary society, as well as being configured around a series of key ideas and core skills. At the core of the two schools are very different, and frequently competing, approaches to purposes and processes which are illustrated in the diagram below. The term 'inside-out' was frequently used in BSF bidding as a proxy for 'transformation', to communicate that the new or remodelled school really would be different. At its most ambitious it means transferring from an external/teacher centric approach to a more student/learner-centric mode.



For Human Scale Education the ideas at the heart of the two school scenarios and the contrasts delineated in the diagram relate to decisions made about ethos, organisation, pedagogy and curriculum and the practices that relate to them:

Ethos

- restorative practices
- social justice
- democratic
- respect equal value
- parental partnership
- multi agency
- community hubresource
- inclusive not segregated
- well-being
- student voiceparticipation
- sustainability

Pedagogy

- active
- applied
- authentic
- empowering
- collaborative
- varied and broad in approached
- varied in human and ICT applications

Organisation

- team
- link and flow
- flat hierarchy
- devolved
- mixed not segregated
- home bases learnig communities
- time and routines as appropriate

Curriculum

- integrated
- authentic
- student centred
- controversial issues
- community focused
- context rich
- co constructed
- formal and informal

Human Scale Education – transformation in practice

The essence of the HSE approach is not new or unique to the UK. Reference is frequently made to the guiding principles that underpin the attempts made in Germany to recast its schools in the C21st, to the earlier example of the 'Whanau' concept of education in New

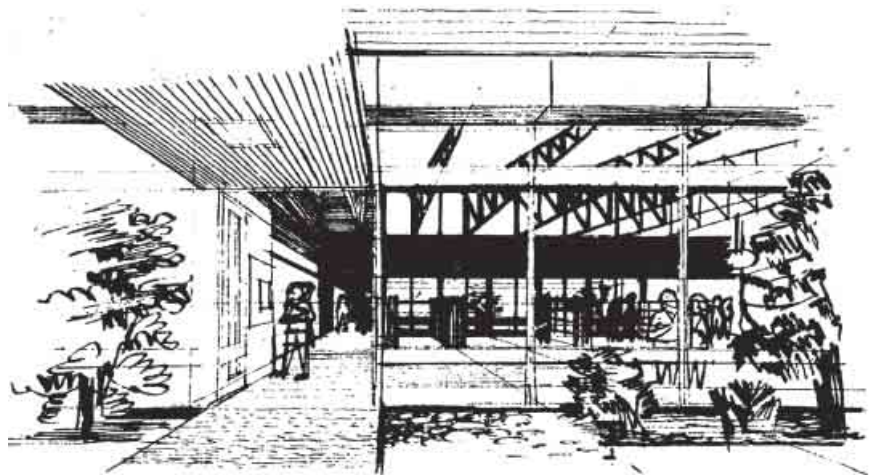
Zealand and to the pioneering work carried out by two 21st century schools across the North Sea.

School as a house of learning – Germany

- An inclusive place, where everybody is welcome, where learners and teachers are accepted in their individuality
- A place where people are allowed time to grow up, to take care of one another and be treated with respect
- A place whose rooms invite you to

stay, offer you the chance to learn, and stimulate you to learn and show imitative

- A place where diversions and mistakes are allowed, and where evaluation in the form of feedback gives you a sense of direction (AfL – Assessment for Learning)
- A place for intensive work, where it feels good to learn and where you can make your own investigations
- A place where learning is infectious.⁷

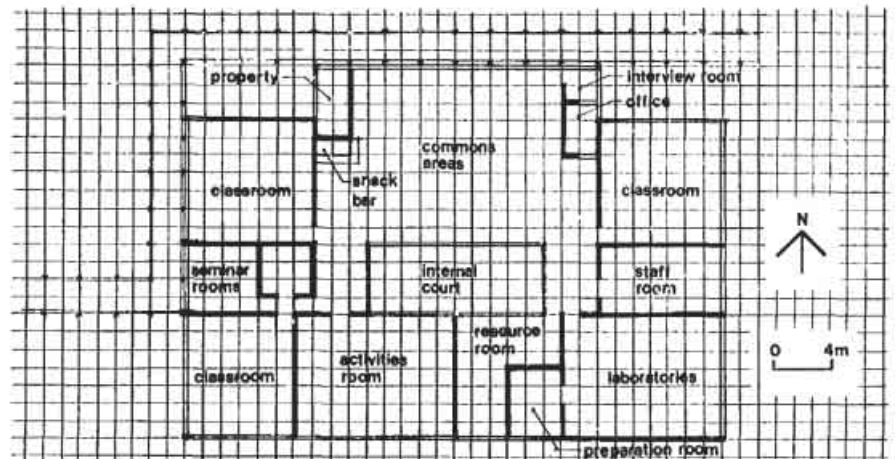


Whanau House Entrance

School as an extended family – New Zealand

The reference to the domestic, 'School as a House of Learning' is a strong echo of an earlier iteration of educational reforms that centred on human flourishing, well being and community development, especially the pioneering work undertaken in New Zealand in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Here a series of learning communities were created around the Maori concept of 'Whanau'. In its simplest interpretation Whanau means 'extended family' and a deep regard for the welfare of all members of that extended family – a concept that in the second decade of the new century seems appealing but somehow whose efficacy is lost in its translation into a market driven system that is seduced by choice and diversity, and rejoices in league tables of winners and losers.

New school designs were drawn to support the new philosophy of breaking up large schools and re-organising them into smaller schools



communities or houses. The new designs incorporated a home base or 'Whanau House', providing a learning environment for 250 young people. It consisted of five classrooms and two seminar rooms grouped around a common room, together with a resource room and a staff planning area. The plan was essentially flexible and fluid to support a variety of school organisation types.⁷

As with the German example earlier, there was an attempt to sketch the aspiration and goals of the new schools:

1. Be a 'caring and sharing'

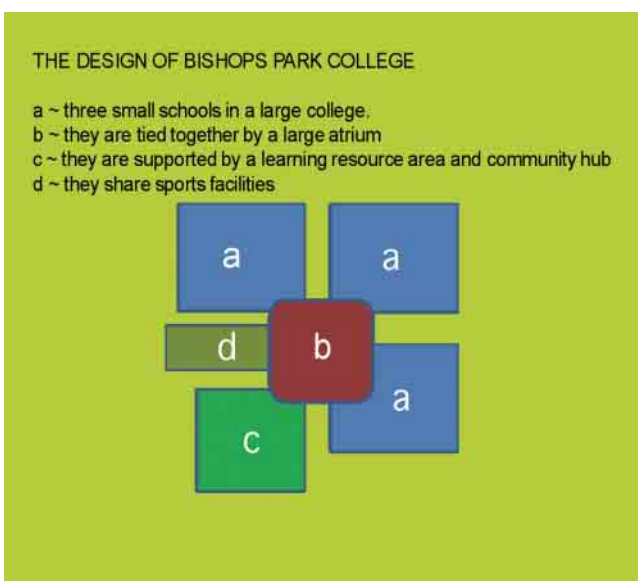
- institution, responsive to the educational and social needs of all its inhabitants;
2. Have a give-and-take relationship with its community, serving it directly and indirectly, and employing its diverse resources;
 3. Provide a congenial setting in which children, teachers, parents and others can, for mutual benefit, co-operate;
 4. Accordingly, provide an environment suitable for adults and children to undertake individual, small-group and large-group work;
 5. Insofar as an environment can do so, be conducive to 'spontaneity and belonging – the antithesis of boredom, regimentation and alienation';
 6. Enable each student to 'develop insights, knowledge and experiences so that he can understand himself and the

people he lives and works with in both the small and larger community, and to make the most of what he can do personally that is unique and vital to him. Dignity and self-esteem are essential to every human being.'

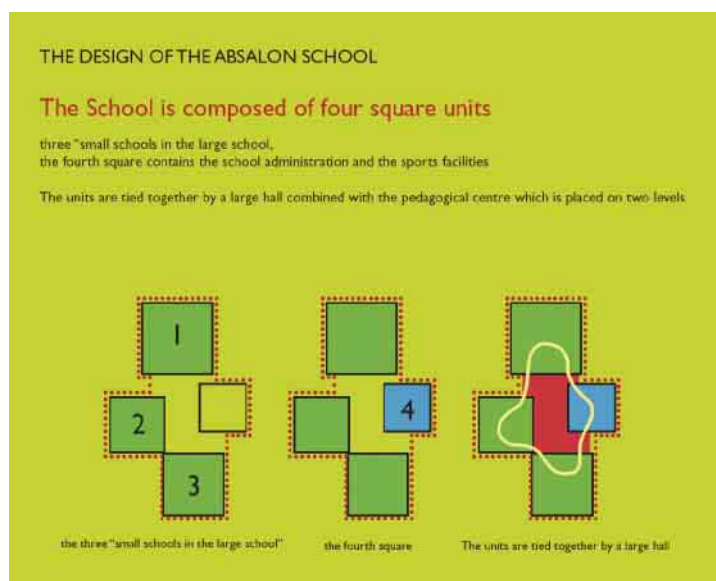
While the use of the pronoun 'he' jars a bit in the last paragraph the messages are still fresh and the challenges much the same as when this was written over thirty years ago. Perhaps not surprisingly at a time when issues of community cohesion, well being and mental health have emerged as significant concerns in contemporary society there has been a renewed interest in the ideas pioneered in New Zealand. During the first decade of the new century two schools bordering the North Sea were designed and built that have strong elements of the Whanau philosophy.

School as 'schools within a school' – Denmark and England

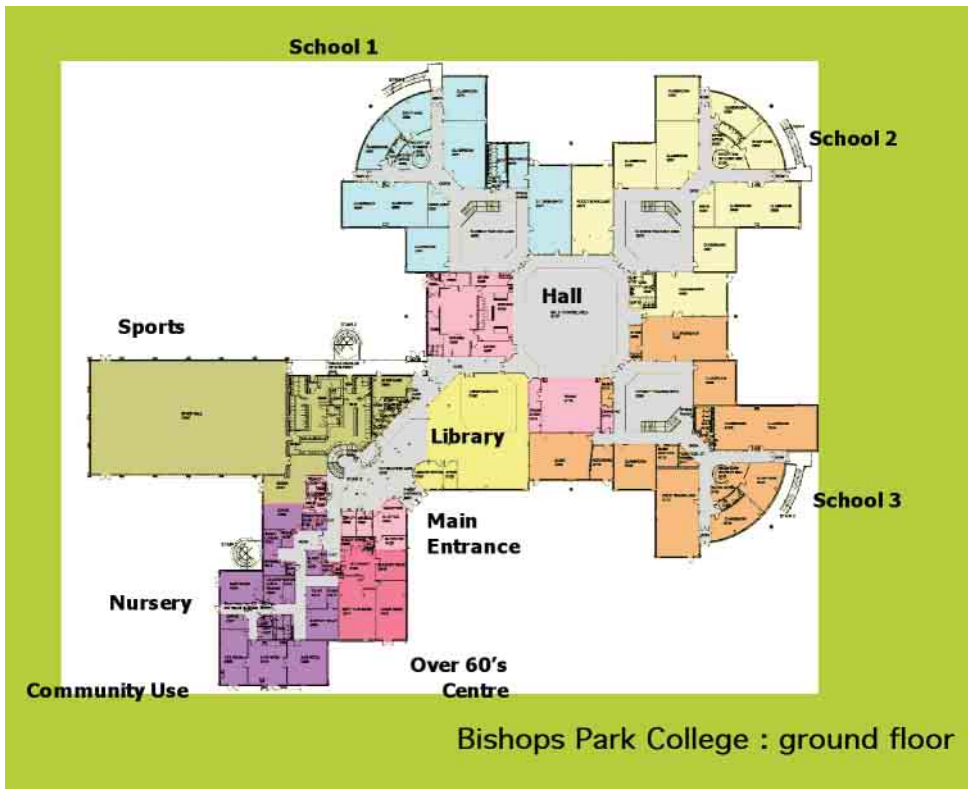
C21st Schools across the North Sea



Bishops Park College, England



Absalon School, Denmark



Three 'schools within a school' at Bishops Park College

Conclusion

As a conclusion a third school scenario is offered that attempts a synthesis of the Whanau idea with some of the key Human Scale principles and practices in place. It assumes a built environment similar to that at Absalon in Denmark or Bishops Park in England and offers a modest definition of 'transformation' in action:

A Working Day at Skokholm

Skokholm opens an hour before first classes begin. Numerous students arrive early and make their way to the central atrium where a 1960's Jukebox has become an early morning hit in the cafe, a few

students are in the gym, others gather around the giant plasma screen, (groups of students from Year 9, produce a daily video of events, news and interviews from the previous day to share and showcase with others). However when the bulk of the students arrive at around 8.30 they enter through a number of different entrances as Skokholm was designed as a series of schools within schools.

The usual answer to 'Which school do you go to?' is unlikely to be 'Skokholm', but rather the name of one of the smaller mini schools – a semi autonomous school within Skokholm. Each school hosts approximately 300 students across the full age range. Students and their staff, both teachers and

support staff belong to teams. About 75 students make up a team. The team spends roughly 80% of its time in its own suite of rooms with the four/five home teachers taking responsibility for working with students in their team.

The mini schools follow an identical curriculum pattern, essentially a team based series of themes that have a particular focus or 'big idea'. Themes are frequently launched by a team event that might include a visit or a theatre group or testimonies from various members of the community....students then elect to join one of the programmes that are on offer. Student groups, working within the small teams are therefore pretty flexible and there is much independent and small group research. There is always an outcome. It may be a video, an exhibition in the local library or train station, an anthology of short stories, a dance-drama to be shared with partner primary schools etc. Many of the ideas for the themes come through conversations among students and with staff. There is a genuine co-construction of the curriculum with staff accepting responsibility for balance and breadth of study, skills and progression. The students engage in heated debate about what it is that is worthwhile to study and have to achieve a consensus. Small groups of students agree aspects of the theme that will become the focus of their enquiry and plan their research.

For one day each week students join a subject specific MasterClass, an

arrangement gives access to an element of subject work and gives staff an chance to work in a different way. It is also an opportunity for colleagues in a cognate area to work together. On six occasions a year, at the end of each half term, subject colleagues lead a three day event of deep learning in their particular area.

Each of the mini schools holds a full range of facilities that support a variety of activities including the ability to construct in a range of media, both physical and virtual. Each pair of schools has access to more specialist spaces eg for more advanced science or specialised technology. All share an LRC and Leisure Centre which are also open to the wider community, including evenings and Saturday mornings.

The team of 75 students and their staff is the organising unit. It has considerable autonomy to determine how it allocates time to tasks. There are no bells, although there are set times for breaks and lunch...to avoid creating an institutional crush, such times are staggered between the schools.

Fundamental at Skokholm are a set of relationships, student with student, staff with staff, student with staff, student with task, student with environment, student with community, that start from and are practised in a context that is radically different to that experienced in the vast bulk of secondary schools in England today. It is the drive to create true places of 'inside- out' experience and

responsibility that holds the power to liberate, democratise and transform. A transformation that will gain strength through coherence and reap the rewards of synergy. Such synergy that can flow from linking a student-centred ethos, with a respectful curriculum and a collaborative, research-based pedagogy grounded in a rich dialogue of Assessment for Learning. It is these dispositions, practised in a context where the norms and processes of the institution work with the grain of youth rather than against it, that holds the door to transformation and success for learners. It is these ideas and practices that lie at the heart of Human Scale Education and should inform and animate the designs for our new C21st learning environments. They may be a challenge but A. A. Milne reminded us of the need to change and think afresh:

'Here is Edward Bear, coming down the stairs now, bump, bump, BUMP, BUMP – on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming down the stairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a minute and think of it.'



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