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A Manifesto for Small Schools: The Story of an Intersectional Research, Practice, and Politics Project

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Abstract

As in many parts of the world, there is concern for small schools in the United Kingdom (UK). Motivated by this concern, a group, which included researchers and educators amongst others, came together to compile a manifesto, a set of statements about the importance of small schools and their value to education and wider society. Inspired by a manifesto produced in Italy, the manifesto for small schools and associated briefing notes for the UK were published in 2022, following a year-long collaborative process informed by research, practice, and politics.

Keywords: *small school, manifesto, community, rural research, politics*

A Manifesto for Small Schools

A manifesto makes manifest – makes public – a series of intentions and beliefs. The manifesto for small schools developed in the United Kingdom (UK) recently does just this. It makes a series of statements about the importance of small schools and their value to education and wider society. The manifesto speaks to all who may have an interest in small schools (and those who do not) and calls for acknowledgement, recognition, and support for these schools and their communities. It is, however, primarily a joyous celebration of these places and people, explicitly avoiding doom-mongering and deficit talk.

The manifesto for small schools was published in the United Kingdom in 2022 (see Figure 1), following a year-long collaborative process which formally began at a British Educational Research Association (BERA) event in June 2021 (see BERA, 2021). Led by Dr Cath Gristy and Neil Short (Chair of the National Association of Small Schools [NASS]; see NASS, 2023), development of the manifesto moved through a series of teacher, schools, and union consultations organised by NASS. It appeared in the spring of 2022, in print and online, with an associated set of briefing notes (Gristy, 2022). The briefing notes are designed to be useful to anyone wanting information for debates, media, and so on, and include key international research publications and reports.

Small Schools MANIFESTO



Small schools are **ASSETS, CENTRES FOR INNOVATION in EDUCATION and COMMUNITIES and TREASURIES for their LOCALITIES.**

Small schools are

ideal places for research, innovation and development; in teaching and learning, curriculum development, leadership and for developing quality practice in education through collaboration and partnership.

This manifesto calls for:

- ✓ Acknowledgement of and support for small schools as centres for research, innovation and development in teaching and learning and in their communities and localities.
- ✓ The recognition and celebration of and support for collaborative practices amongst schools; collaboration by choice, not through force or coercion.



Small schools are

connected with, central to and assets for communities through their influential relationships with pupils, parents and extended families and as such provide opportunities for adult learning, developments in technology and sustainability.

This manifesto calls for:

- ✓ The recognition of the importance of schools to the communities and places they serve and the importance of communities to schools: Schools do not exist in isolation, this fact calls for acknowledgement of situated contextual factors which interact with the school and its locality such as housing, employment and provisions of services.
- ✓ Acknowledgement and celebration of and support for a commitment to building a wide range of relationships in education settings as an integral part of the UK's Levelling Up agenda.

Small schools must **be funded fairly.**

This manifesto calls for:

- ✓ a fair funding system for all schools. It calls particularly for a system that acknowledges and funds small schools and other schools that challenge standard financial efficiency models.



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Figure 1: The Small Schools Manifesto, as of May 2022

The manifesto has been inspired in part by the manifesto for small schools developed by the Istituto Nazionale Documentazione Innovazione Ricerca Educativa (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research [INDIRE], 2020a) in Italy. Their manifesto (INDIRE, 2020b) began through work documenting experiences of distance learning in geographically isolated schools which were seeing falling numbers of pupils. The INDIRE's work on small schools aims to support the permanence of schools in geographically disadvantaged territories and to build networks of people and resources. The manifesto developed by INDIRE, now available in several different translations, was an important step, documenting explicitly, publicly and politically the state, status, and potential for small schools in a nation.

As in Italy, there is concern for small schools in the contemporary schooling environment of the UK for similar and different reasons. Education in the four nations of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) is a devolved matter, so there are differences in the way education and school policy operates. The socio-economic and policy contexts for schools in England (which will be familiar to a greater or lesser extent in other countries) have been documented in the manifesto briefing notes:

Changes in government policy since 2010 has [sic] impacted negatively on small schools. In 2010 government supported rapid and extensive policy reform to establish a school-led system underpinned by academisation (Academies Bill, 2010).

These reforms focused on creating large, efficient, effective schools with leaders that work directly with the government. (Gristy, 2022, p. 2)

In 2016, the white paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (Department for Education, 2016) was clear that small schools must come together in formal collaborations, preferably multi-academy trusts (MATs), in order to survive. Small schools appeared to have little choice but to enter formal collaborations (Church of England, 2018) like MATs that “bring together leadership, autonomy, funding and accountability across a group of academies” (Department for Education, 2016, p. 57). However, the financial challenges of small rural schools can make them unattractive for academy groups (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019; 2020). Small schools (in England) are twice as likely to close as the national average (O'Brien, 2019). The reduction in the number of small schools is located primarily in rural and peripheral areas.

As I hope the briefing notes (Gristy, 2022) will prove to be a useful go-to source of information for anyone with an interest in small schools, they will need regular updates as research and policy change. For example, a new threat for small schools in England is the recent changes to the national schools' inspection framework (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, [OFSTED], 2022), which appears to be mismatched to small school operations. The Times Educational Supplement (Roberts, 2022) declared in a headline: “Small primaries five times more likely to be ‘inadequate’ than larger schools.”

The manifesto for small schools itself will perhaps prove more stable over time and resilient to changes than the briefing notes. It looks to state a series of long-standing key beliefs about small schools, their benefits to their pupils, local and wider communities. This has been done in a way that can be interpreted for local and political purposes, as well as for professional and academic research. In the development phase, it was decided that this document should be as universal as possible, speaking to, and useful for, anyone with an interest in small schools. For example, definitions of small schools are many and various; the manifesto takes an inclusive approach: “Acknowledging the diversity of definitions, this manifesto includes all schools (including nurseries and pre-schools) defined as or who define themselves as ‘small’” (Gristy, 2022, p. 1).

The manifesto appears to be having an impact already, although the evidence is anecdotal at the moment. It has appeared in informal professional spaces (teachers exchanging resources online), at a meeting of a headteacher union (The National Association of Head Teachers), in local

government publications (Rural Services Network, 2022), at the centre of a new research agenda (at the BERA conference, 2022; BERA, 2021), and as the precursor for manifestos to be used in other UK nations (BERA workshop planned for 2023). We wish it good speed and a fair wind as it travels through education places and spaces, and we will observe carefully as and when it is used, and the differences it makes.

Notes

The latest version of the *Small Schools Manifesto*, along with the *Briefing Notes*, the *Small School Research Agenda* and other associated documents is fully accessible. The documents can be accessed here: <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/education/university-practice-partnerships/research-in-practice/small-schools-manifesto>

These documents are also accessible through ResearchGate via the project, “*Small schools – big issues? A research collective*”: <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Small-schools-big-issues-A-research-collective>. All researchers and teachers with an interest in small schools are welcome to join this collective.

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