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## **Save Our School: the case study of a small school faced with closure**

*Dr Margaret McLay, Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University*

### *Background*

Cohen and Manion (1994) define action research as “a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention” (p. 186) The present study concerns more than an intervention on a small-scale, it involves the proposed closure of an entire school purportedly with the aim of improving educational standards throughout the Borough. At the beginning of last year this was not a topic which was high in my consciousness, but I became a governor of a school which was subsequently earmarked for closure. I am also a local councillor (elected member) for the ward in which the school is situated. This paper describes the events of the last year and the consequences, one of which has been to establish that better ways, less disruptive of children’s education, must be found to deal with falling school roles; the second of which has been to discover that there is virtually no research into the impact of school closures, let alone into interventions that might make the process as painless as possible.

Herbert (2000) has shown that schools in disadvantaged areas have suffered from the introduction of greater parental choice of schools for their children. Schools in socio-economically poor areas tend to have lower test results, and since these are published in “league tables” parents are often swayed by them into choosing schools which have the best results in these tests. Schools in poorer areas are then left with the pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds, and so the spiral of decline for these schools begins. Gorard et al (2000) suggests that Ofsted inspection reports and LEA policy also have a significant influence.

Daisy Hill Primary School has suffered from the problems outlined by Herbert and Gorard et al. The school is situated in a town in the North West of England. This town has an unusual socio-economic profile in that it contains residents in every socio-economic band, which means that economic inequality is on a vast scale. The pupil catchment area for Daisy Hill is a microcosm of the town’s overall profile - it is situated in a semi-rural, semi-urban area with large executive homes, middle class detached and semi-detached houses, and a social housing estate with many residents living on various welfare benefits. The school itself is on a pleasant site next to green belt land. It contains its own wood and pond which form a nature reserve, and has good outdoor play facilities. The school buildings are relatively modern, built in the late 60’s. Apart from two upstairs classrooms, the buildings provide access to wheelchair users. The school has in recent years become a focus for community regeneration, providing classes in parenting, adult basic skills, ICT amongst other facilities.

The present school was formed from the amalgamation of an infants’ school (4-6) and a junior school (7-11). On top of this, the headteacher had followed a charismatic head who had retired on ill-health grounds. He had been able to persuade parents from the wealthier housing to send their pupils to the school. The new head faced the difficulties of dealing with staff who were strongly attached to the previous head. Furthermore, the amalgamation was not popular with the parents, and several children were removed. The class divides opened up and many children from middle-class homes went to a neighbouring school. This was followed by an Ofsted inspection which was negative in its findings. Many of the governing-body of that time resigned. The headteacher began the process of the school’s recovery. She had to deal with the removal of an incompetent teacher who dealt with the important year 6

(age 11) class. There was a very inexperienced deputy head in place. With a good deal of persuasion, the LEA devise an imaginative intervention to improve teaching and learning in the school: this was a three-way swap of deputy headteachers which gave each of them the further, or new, experiences to aid their development. A new governing body evolved with a wide range of skills, and it was to this that I was appointed in May 2003. Standard Assessment Test results began to improve, so much so that the School gained two national School Achievement Award for improvement. The School won other awards, particularly for sport, and became the first school to have an extension of the 'Playing for Success' facilities offered by the local football team: this has provided a suite of computers and motivational learning tasks for children. Two teachers have also won national Teacher of the Year awards. As a result, school numbers have started to rise, and the previous negative image is being dissipated. Despite this, the LEA has decided that this school should close.

The decision to close such a school has serious repercussions. Schools earmarked for closure often serve areas of socio-economic deprivation, and yet they are often the only beacons of hope and regeneration for such areas. This is particularly true in Daisy Hill's town which is generally regarded as too wealthy to attract large-scale funding to alleviate the problems of poverty. Socio-economically poor people living in such areas suffer greatly, not only from being surrounded by people who are far wealthier than they, but also from not receiving economic aid out of their situation.

### *The diary of events*

#### September 2003

4th: It was with shock that the parents and governors learnt that Daisy Hill was one of nine schools earmarked for closure. Hope was offered in a consultation document which provided three options for schools in this area, only one of which involved the closure of Daisy Hill.

16th: Meeting of Governing Body to discuss response to the consultation

20th: Parents from the proposed receiving school lobby me at my councillor's surgery - they do not wish the solution of a federation of the two schools

24th: Governing Body meeting with Staff and then with parents and wider community

#### October 2003

Governing Body discuss draft letter to the Director of Education. This emphasises the extended nature of the school which is playing an important role in the regeneration of the area through its adult education and other work. The importance of such schools is supported in a report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2003).

#### November 2003

6th: Consultation meeting on closure of another neighbouring school. Daisy Hill governors who attend feel that the meeting was badly handled and resolve to take the lead at the consultation meeting of Daisy Hill

12th: Governing Body meeting to discuss organisation of consultation meeting with LEA

13th: Meeting of LEA , Staff and Governors.

14th LEA start to contact staff about options for leaving for new posts. Governing Body send in objections stating that this is premature.

17th: Consultation meeting with LEA. Governors and parents feel they put across a strong case. The courteous behaviour of the parents is commented upon.

27th Governors' and ward councillors' responses on consultation document sent to Director of Education

#### December 2003

16th Timetable of decision-making meetings issued by LEA

#### January 2004

5th: Governors' and headteacher's final response sent to LEA for the Executive meeting

7th: email from LEA saying that they have not had time to read these.  
Various emails from governors to members of Scrutiny Committee

11th: MP writes letter of support for Daisy Hill

13th: Scrutiny Committee - no decision made, but lack of certain documentation is commented on. It is asked that these documents are presented to the Executive for their meeting

14th Governing Body meeting to discuss questions for the Executive meeting

15th Press release issued. Chair appears on local television. Governors issue emails to Executive members

19th: Executive resolve to close Daisy Hill and five other schools, despite the requested documents not being tabled.

30th: Executive propose a working party to use Daisy Hill site as a community facility

#### February 2004

5th: Council meeting. Parents ask questions, but do not feel these are answered. Further press releases are issued

16th: final Executive meeting to determine closures. The proposal now has to go to the Schools Organisation Committee

#### March 2004

1st: LEA tries to convene meetings to discuss the closure of the school, despite the fact that this decision can only be made by the SOC.. The governors instruct staff not to attend these.

7th: Discover National Association for Small Schools website. Join and ask for advice. They respond by saying that they are very concerned about flaws in the present closures system, they feel that SOCs and Schools Adjudicators are biased. They note that schools and parents have to fight closure in an uneven situation, i.e. they have to raise fighting funds themselves, and pay for their own legal advice. If the Schools Adjudicator decides to close the school, there is no right of appeal and the only recourse is to Judicial Review which is rarely successful and of very limited use.

The NASS offer to talk about Daisy Hill's case when they meet with the School's Minister.

A complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman about the LEA process is prepared.

I start a literature search for information about the impact of school closures - this leads to the discovery that there is virtually no research on this topic.

8th: the make-up of the SOC is finally revealed. It is discovered that the chair of governors of the receiving school is on it. Daisy Hill send in an objection, and she stands down.

14th: Daisy Hill governors send their proposals for reform of the Closures procedure to the NASS who are in turn discussing these with the Minister. The main proposal from Daisy Hill is that the closures process should follow that of the Local Government Commission who decide on local electoral boundaries - this process is done by independent officers who take evidence and advice from local people.

18th: An official complaint about the process is sent to the LEA - this is prior to the complaint being made to the Ombudsman.

Governor's lawyers send a letter to the LEA also complaining about the process and about the missing documentation, especially a traffic survey which came out in favour of Daisy Hill.

April 2004

Ongoing: Preparation of report for the School Organisation Committee meeting

14th: NASS asked for advice on our SOC document

21st: meeting to discuss and rehearse SOC presentation

26th: Chair presents response from DfES about their definition of an extended school. It is clear that Daisy Hill is in these terms

27th: further lawyer's letter to LEA regarding the process

30th: the Learning and Skills Council representative is identified and asked about the SOC meeting - she has not been informed about it.

May 2004

5th: SOC meets. There is no unanimous decision to close Daisy Hill, the only case where this happened. The proposal then goes to the School Adjudicator. LSC representative votes against one school and abstains in all the other cases.

12th: Parent writes a letter of complaint to the LSC about the conduct of their representative. It transpires that the representative is instructed not to vote when there is no case of adult education - this despite the fact that Daisy Hill school offers adult education classes.

11th: Governing body meeting to discuss after school club

16th: Chair of Governors told by Local Government Ombudsman that under the Local Government Act of 1974, he cannot make a complaint because he is a school governor. This points up an area of legislation which needs to be changed, since the 1988 Education Act provided for parent governors who ought to have the right to complain.

20th : governing body meeting to discuss responses to Adjudicator

#### June 2004

17th governing Body meeting

28th : public meeting held by Adjudicator

#### July 2004

5th: Letter to Adjudicator in answer to points raised by LEA

30th:: Adjudicator rules in favour of IEA. His document uses the wording of the LEA's proposal

31st: Governing Body meeting to discuss way forward. Chair writes to Adjudicator to ask if he had all the facts presented to him

#### August 2004

9th: email from Vice Chair to lawyers to ask for costings of going to judicial review

#### September 2004

13th: Meeting with parents to discuss tactics. Parents feel they cannot afford the £12,000+ for judicial review - this is not a wealthy community

Letter drafted to Schools Minister

Complaint to Ombudsman is drafted for parent to send

Press releases prepared

Governing body meet unofficially. Chair resigns because he feels a more conciliatory face is now needed. New Chair is appointed

20th: Official meeting of Governing Body to ratify appointment of new chair. Further strategy is discussed.

27th: First Project meeting for the amalgamation of the two schools is held. It is clear that the receiving school has major structural problems and is not disability, health and safety nor fire regulations compliant. This demonstrates a clear lack of forward planning on behalf of the LEA.

### October 2004

3rd: MP is made aware of the problems. He writes to the Leader of the Council to suggest ways forward.

letter to Schools Minister is sent off.

### *The research proposal*

#### **1. Rationale for this study:**

1.1 The falling birth rate in the United Kingdom is forcing education authorities to examine surplus places in primary schools. The School Standards and Framework Act (1998) places a duty on local education authorities in England to consider action in schools “where there are 25% or more surplus places, particularly where the school is performing poorly.”

1.2. Since parental choice was introduced in England, pupil roles at less popular schools have also fallen. Coupled with the falling birth rate, such schools are highly vulnerable to closure. The small amount of research conducted in England (for instance: Gorard, Taylor & Fitz, 2000) shows that such schools tend to be in areas of socio-economic deprivation.

1.3. Background information supplied by the National Association for Small Schools shows that the way in which LEAs tackle the problem of falling roles is highly variable. One urban authority has opted to conduct the process in two stages. The first stage considered schools with 35% surplus places regardless of how the school was performing. The second stage is looking at the remaining schools with 25% surplus places. This process has not considered social need or geographical spread, which means that the first round of closures is confined to geographically small areas which are largely relatively deprived in socio-economic terms, and which do not necessarily have lower birth rates than neighbouring areas where there are no closures as yet. According to the National Association for Small Schools (2004) a largely rural shire county in the midlands has decided to ignore falling roles as far as possible, looking instead at whether the school can sustain three or more teachers. This has shifted the emphasis to teacher strength and effectiveness, and removed the uncertainty which arises for parents, pupils and staff of their school falling below an arbitrary percentage of pupils which could trigger closure.

1.4. At the same time, government policy is exhorting schools to become more involved in the local community. The introduction of extended schools, encouraged in the Education Act 2002, along the model of full-service schools in the United States, is being recommended. In the wake of cases such as that of Victoria Climbié, the green paper *Every child matters* (2003) puts the education authority and schools at the forefront of ensuring that the welfare needs of children, especially looked after children, are being met. Through the Safer School

Partnerships, the Government has asked schools to help in maintaining law and order in school and in their communities beyond.

1.5. The setting up of Education Action Zones (now Excellence Clusters or Excellence in cities Action Zones) is predicated on the view that education is the key to regeneration of socio-economically deprived communities, although *Every child matters* (2003) recognises that schools and education authorities cannot tackle this problem alone, and that they need to work in partnership with social services, and other agencies.

1.6 The policies for parental choice and school closure appear, therefore, to come into conflict. Activities leading to greater school involvement in the community particularly in the areas of child welfare, crime reduction and regeneration of more socio-economically deprived areas can be negated by closure.

1.7 The closure of a school is generally accompanied by feelings of loss and anguish amongst pupils, staff and parents (see for instance, *Education Guardian*, Tuesday May 4th 2004, "Battle for hearts and minds", p. 9). The hypothesis is that closure will result in a disrupted educational experience for the children of both closing and receiving schools. A further hypothesis is that local communities will suffer in those areas where schools with extended community facilities are closed.

## **2. The need for research**

The focus of this research has emerged in discussion with the National Association for Small Schools, and through various searches of academic literature and other studies. Overall there appear to be few impact studies in recent years. Recent research into the effects of school closures has tended to concentrate on rural areas in the United States (Spence, 2000; Howley & Smith, 2000) and Australia (Paul, 1998; Evans, 1998). One Australian study has looked at impact in urban areas (Charikar & Seiffert; 1994) There is little recent (post Education Reform Act 1988) research in England, except for work by Gorard, Taylor & Fitz (2000) cited above, on school size and decline. Indeed, Hansard of 9th December 2002 reports a reply to Mr Hoban, MP from David Milliband, School Standards Minister, reports that the Department for Education and Skills has not commissioned any impact studies. He continues "However, where a failing school is closed, it is usual for the former pupils to show greatly increased attainment or better rates of progress at their new schools." This statement needs to be tested with evidence. There is therefore a pressing need for further research in rural areas and in urban areas, particularly those which are suffering the effects of reduction in public transport, closure of local shops and post offices, churches and other community facilities: such closures are felt more in areas where there is socio-economic deprivation. Such areas lack the facilities of the inner city and the support networks of close-knit rural communities.

### This research aims:

1) to assess the extent of the impact of school closures in rural and urban communities in England. It will look at

- impact upon pupil performance
- impact upon community facilities and activities
- impact upon community regeneration

2) to find examples of good practice in seeking alternatives to closure or of mitigating the effects of closure

3) to make recommendations from the findings to promote good practice in handling the issue of small schools serving areas of deprivation

### **3. Methodology:**

The complexity of the topic requires a multifaceted approach. It will therefore use both quantitative and qualitative methods where appropriate.

In order to assess impact it will be necessary to take a longitudinal approach over a minimum of three years. The present proposal is to conduct a Pilot Study to provide in the first instance benchmark data for such a longitudinal study. This pilot will last for one year from January to December 2005.

#### The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What is the impact of the announcement of school closure on the community?
2. What is the impact on the community once the school is closed?
3. How comparable is the impact between rural and urban communities, and between communities which have several alternative facilities, such as libraries and community centres and those communities which have none?
4. What is the impact on the receiving schools?

#### Stages of the pilot study research:

1. Areas where school closures have just been announced and where schools have been closed for at least one year, will be identified from DfES data.
2. A stratified sample reflecting the range of urban and rural settings will be drawn from both these areas, encompassing no more than two authorities in all for this Pilot Study.
3. Data on pupil performance, on pupil recruitment, on range and provision of community facility will be gathered quantitatively, some from existing data sources (such as School Performance Tables).
4. Data on contribution to community regeneration will be gathered qualitatively from a sample of areas, by interviewing participants, and also examining available reports from local authorities, health authorities, local media and voluntary bodies.
5. Further clarification of information from these reports will be sought by interview where necessary.
6. Data from closed/closing schools will be compared with data from receiving schools.

This Pilot forms a coherent project which will make a definite contribution to our understanding of the impact of school closure. Funding will then be sought to extend this research to other LEAs, and over a minimum of three years to build up a more comprehensive longitudinal picture of how lasting the effects of school closure may be.

This research could be further extended to compare findings from other countries.

#### Search tools used:

(Search terms used “school closures”)

Google

Ask Eric

Eric (slightly different results obtained with same search terms)

BEI

Australian Education Index

Social Science Citation Index

Social Science Abstracts

Index to Theses

British Library

education-guardian.co.uk

tes.co.uk

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