School closures, amalgamations and children's play

Bigger may not be better

John Evans

Recent government decisions to close schools with small enrolments appear not to have taken into consideration the implications such a move might have for children's out-of-classroom activities. Drawing on relevant literature, and accounts from teachers who have taught, or are teaching in small and large primary schools, this paper questions the prevailing belief that 'bigger is better' by pointing to some of the unique characteristics of small school playgrounds which provide children with opportunities and experiences not available in larger schools.

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In a recent article in the Education section of *The Age* newspaper, Jane Kenway (1997 p.2), Director of the Centre for Education and Change at Deakin University, remarked:

> In all my years in education, I am yet to hear a parent say: 'Oh, this school is so much better. It is big and crowded and there is an endless list of subjects for my child'. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard a parent talk about the supportive and nurturing values of small to medium size schools.

'Bigger is better' seems to have been the thinking behind recent decisions by state governments to close schools with low student enrolments and force them to amalgamate with bigger schools or merge with other smaller schools nearby to make a bigger school on one campus. For the most part the decisions seem to have been based around the supposed educational advantages bigger schools have to offer, particularly in terms of a broader curriculum. Certain economies of scale are also said to justify closing small schools. It is argued that the limited resources would be better spent in equipping and maintaining a few schools well than in distributing them widely across many smaller schools.

The closure of small schools is not a recent phenomenon nor is it one which is unique to Australia (see Storrs 1980). Since the early 1950s small rural schools have been closed down across the state of Victoria. Even back then, as James (1992) reminds us, local communities tried valiantly to oppose the decisions:

> Despite many a brave confrontation with authorities, the outlying rural communities found their little bush school abandoned, demolished or relocated to a central site (p.84).

The local schools were much more than just centres for teaching and learning. They were meeting houses, voting booths and the venue for many of the towns' social activities. According to James, they were 'the hub of their locality's existence' (p.84) and their loss represented a significant blow to the local community.

To date there have been relatively few studies which have looked at how life in big schools might differ from that in small schools so making the case for the preservation of small schools has not been easy. As Kenway (1997) points out, the advantages of small schools tend to lie in the closeknit, friendly settings they provide for teachers and children but, in a climate of economic rationalism such as we face today, these arguments tend to hold little significance.

In a landmark study Barker and Gump (1964) compared 13 high schools whose enrolment varied from less than 100 to over 2000 students and found that involvement in activities such as music festivals, drama, student government, etc, was much greater in small schools. Smaller schools fostered more harmonious social relationships where the contribution of each member was valued and seen to be important in maintaining group cohesion. As group size increased the number of people participating in decision making

decreased. There was less attempt at consensus. Leadership tended to centralise around one or two people. They also found that while the larger schools offered a greater variety of activities, a much larger proportion of students in small schools actually participated.

With respect to the recent decisions to close many small schools, the one aspect that appears to have been given little consideration is how it might affect children's out-of-classroom lives. What does it mean, for example, to a child who faces moving from a school of thirty to one where there are over three, four or even five hundred other children? How are social relationships affected when one shifts from a small school, where everyone knows each other and where multi-age groups are not only common but necessary for many games, to a setting where space is limited and the playground is segregated because there are so many children? How does such a change influence the types of playground activities that children engage in and how is the role of teacher on 'yard duty' different in a big school as compared to a small school?

Drawing on accounts from teachers who themselves are teaching in, or have taught in, small (less than 60 children) and large (more than 200 children) schools, and from the findings of research studies that have looked at children's play, this paper builds on the findings of Barker and Gump (1964) in making the case that there are certain unique characteristics of small schools (referring here specifically to primary schools) with respect to the social dynamics of the playground which makes them distinctive and which provide children with play experiences which are quite different from those in larger schools. In particular, the argument will be made that children who attend small schools have the opportunity to engage in a greater variety of activities, are given greater freedom and encourage-ment to do so, and further that such opportunities provide them with social and learning experiences of a kind not normally available in large schools.

CONTRASTING PLAYGROUNDS

One of the unique features of many small schools is that children have ready access to ample space and equipment in which and with which to play. There is also greater freedom and encouragement to use the space and equipment in creative ways which provide the children with opportunities to explore, experiment, challenge and extend themselves in a manner which is rarely available in bigger schools. This point is nicely illustrated in the following accounts from two teachers who are each teaching in rural schools which have student enrolments of less than 60 children.

> *We are fortunate enough to have a creek running through the school grounds. The children can play near the creek as long as they have gum boots on. One of the joys of yard duty is to marvel at children's creations in the school yard. The most innovative children are often underachievers in the classroom. Examples of school yard creations are bridges over the creek which any adult could walk over. The children try to rid the creek of pollution and discover ways of diverting the creek to avoid oil slicks. Once a large group of children joined forces to dig up a mound of sand to resemble a dam. The children dug out the flow for the channel of water and when the dam's reserve wall broke they had a reserve dam. Their ingenuity was educational.*

> *At this school the children are very fortunate as they have a very large grassed playing area which includes a soccer field, cricket nets and field, a netball court. In addition, there is a sand area which has the monkey bars, climbing frame, pipe tunnels and an adventure playground area which consists of ladders, climbing net, swing ropes, a broken bridge, tyres and a cubby house. The school provides children with a large number of balls of every size, skipping ropes, cricket gear and small bats.*

This contrasts with the description provided by a teacher in a school with 510 children and precious little playground space where:

> *... large balls, such as basketballs and footballs, are not permitted. Games such as touch football and soccer must be played using tennis balls or mini-footballs and any form of cricket is not allowed. In addition, if children want to play ball games, they have to bring their own balls from home because the school considered it to be too expensive to provide them.*

The extent to which children in smaller schools are free to play is nicely illustrated in reference to 'cubby building'. Children love to play in places where they can hide and have some privacy. It is ideal for pretend or fantasy play. If permitted, children will often build cubbies or 'hide-aways' in trees and bushes by using any materials lying around the playground such as branches, sticks, rope, clothing, etc. The very fortunate children are even allowed to bring materials from home and their cubbies take on a more elaborate structure.

One teacher described how, in her school, children built cubbies under the cypress trees which bordered the playground. The natural surroundings, amount of space and the availability of loose materials meant that cubby building was a major and popular undertaking which often involved the whole school.

In another small, rural school a teacher described how the paddocks, which lay just beyond the boundaries of the school, provided abundant play opportunities for the children at recess times. Even though playing there meant the children were out of sight of the teachers, there was never any thought of preventing them from going over to climb the trees and play in the long grass. The interesting thing was that the children hardly ever bothered to play on the fixed climbing apparatus that the school had installed for them in the playground. They much preferred to build their own forts and cubbies from whatever materials they could gather from the playground and from home.

By way of contrast a teacher in a large school, also surrounded by majestic pine trees which lay around the boundaries of the school, explained how the children were not permitted to climb or even go near the trees because the thick foliage hid them from the view of the supervising teachers. The concern for safety and ease of supervision took precedence over children's

pleas to be able to play in and under the trees.

A teacher who had recently been shifted from a small school to a large one provided an interesting comparison of the two settings. What surprised him was that both schools had playgrounds of a similar size. The difference, however, was that one school had 25 students and the other 595. A major problem in the latter was collision injuries. The only real problem in the former was getting the children back into the classroom after recess. The only rule that the two schools had in common was that playing marbles for keeps was not allowed. In fact this was about the only rule that existed in the small school other than the 'understanding' that children would not fight or tease each other.

In the bigger school the list of things children were prohibited from doing was lengthy and made very public by constant reminders from the Principal. Some of the things children were not allowed to do were:

- play in or under trees
- play any games involving tackling, fighting or piggy-backing
- play ball games near the school buildings
- play chasing games around the school buildings
- play in or near the toilets
- run on concrete and bitumen areas
- play in walkways or on stairs
- move outside their designated play area
- play with or throw objects such as sticks
- play on or near the gardens

The emphasis the school placed on having a safe play environment could be measured by the fact that, in the past two years, they had removed many pieces of equipment, including suspended tractor tyres, swings, raised stepping stones, overhanging branches and dense undergrowth.

In a study of a Victorian primary school with an enrolment of some 300 children, Perkins and Russell (1993) concluded that:

> ... both through the physical design of playgrounds and through teachers' rules and expectations of play, children's activities at recess and lunchtime do not always represent free and spontaneous play' (p.8).

To illustrate their point they went on to say how games that involved interacting with and manipulating the natural environment were disallowed. 'This kind of play was considered messy, potentially dangerous and too destructive of the gardens and the natural environment' (p.9).

Safety and ease of supervision are paramount concerns in all schools but they are particularly sensitive issues in large schools. When many children engage in active vigorous play in a confined area then accidents are more likely to happen than if space is ample. When space is limited the school may find it necessary to have strict rules which define what and where children can and cannot play. In one inner suburban school, teachers reported that children were not permitted to run around the school buildings or equipment for fear of running into other children. They were also prohibited from playing any ball games, because of concerns that someone would be hit, or any games involving tackling or wrestling for fear of personal injury or damage to clothing.

A similar situation is reported by another teacher who found herself in a school where the student population had doubled to 410 as a consequence of amalgamations. This forced the school to add classrooms which were located in space which was previously part of the playground. The school playing area now consisted of any available space left between buildings with the exception of the netball courts which were the prized section of the playground as it was the largest level area. As she explained:

> *To manage the problems (mainly accidents due to children running into each other) arising from lack of space the playground was segregated. The older children were given the netball courts from Monday to Thursday, because they play more vigorous games. The younger children have access to the courts on Fridays.*

Rotating the use of certain areas of the playground is one way in which larger schools try to ensure that all children have some access to space and equipment. In some of the older inner suburban schools, there is only a small grassed area and this is often in great demand. To preserve this area and to avoid congestion and possible arguments, schools allocate certain days to each grade level. There are even some schools without any grassed area at all and they have to walk the children to nearby parks and ovals at sports time and during the long lunch break so that they can safely play various field games.

Segregating the playground, while it may enhance safety and provide better access to limited facilities and equipment, can also lead to particular problems. As one teacher wrote:

> *In schools with age-segregated playgrounds the teacher's role of law-enforcer is emphasised with much time being spent on trivial territorial disputes. Many complaints are made, not on the basis of disruption of games, but merely because children have drifted into others' territory. In addition, because teachers are usually allocated duties with the age groups they teach, children perceive their authority as only being valid in that teaching area; consequently, mixed age disputes are even more difficult to resolve. As well as adding an unnecessary burden to the teacher's duty, this can increase the disharmony within the school.*

When you take away from children the opportunity to play chasing and ball games or engage in any form of rough and tumble play, then you eliminate many of the things they love to do. Left with little to do it is not surprising that some children will occupy their time engaging in activities which deliberately challenge and even defy the adult-imposed rules. This creates a 'them and us' mentality where the children play illicit games when the teacher on playground supervision is not looking. It places the teachers in the unenviable situation of having to act in a policing role. As Goodnow and Burns (1985) found in their study of over 2000 children in 145 schools, teachers who acted like 'policemen' were unpopular. Children didn't mind strict

teachers but wanted them also to have a good sense of humour and be able to have fun with children. They found that children wanted to be seen as 'special' or, at the very least, to have their individual needs known. This is not an easy thing to do in large schools.

In large schools the teacher on 'yard duty' has his or her hands full just watching over the multitude of children in the playground. They cannot afford the time to stop and chat with any one group for too long, let alone play with them. In fact they are discouraged from doing so by Education Departments which regularly warn teachers of their 'duty of care' when out in the playground. Not to carry out this duty vigilantly is to risk being accused of negligence in the event of an accident or injury. As a teacher currently in a large school wrote:

> *Certainly teachers are not concerned with the character of play itself nor with learning about their pupils' social interactions outside the classroom. Indeed, the staffroom is seen as a well protected refuge from the children's activities and the prospect of entering the arena of play in the performance of yard duty is met with a marked lack of enthusiasm.*

One of the clear messages that comes from teachers in smaller schools is that playground supervision (or 'yard duty' as it is often called here in Australia) is not the onerous and unwelcome task that it is for many teachers in large schools (see Evans 1990). One of the main reasons for this is that, apart from having fewer students to supervise at recess and lunch times, the ample space and equipment means that children are able to occupy themselves with minimal teacher intervention.

In the smaller school, where there are fewer children to watch over, the teacher may be able to spend more time with each individual and group. In fact it is not unheard of for the teacher to occasionally join in a game, which the children love, because it not only shows that the teacher is interested in what they play, but it reveals a more 'human' side to the teacher. According to Lindsay and Palmer (1981:

> No better medium exists through which to establish good teacher-pupil relations than in play. A teacher can learn much about children and the way they think by observing them at play in a child's world' (p.14).

In some cases, as in one or two teacher schools, the supervision is little more than a glance out of the staffroom window occasionally to check that there are no serious problems or disputes. As one teacher explained, children would play in the 'back paddock' at lunch times and, to call them inside, he would blow a whistle. The 'back paddock' was a favourite place for playing because there were lots of trees and plenty of places to hide.

As another teacher, working by himself in a small rural school, commented:

> *Yard duty does not really exist. Occasionally I will join in a game of soccer or help turn a skipping rope but with the full responsibility of the school's administration on my shoulders lunchtime is more often than not spent in the office doing bookwork or on the phone. Many outside phone calls occur during the lunchbreak when they hope the teacher will be free. The majority of the disputes in the playground are settled by older children.*

Children in small schools generally have no need to fight over territory. In larger schools, however, children often have to compete for space and equipment which can lead to disputes and, quite possibly, the need for teacher intervention. Some schools with large enrolments and little space stagger playtimes (particularly the long lunch break) in an attempt to reduce the congestion in the playground. Grades one to three might take their lunch break at 12.00 and the upper grades will break at 1.00pm. While this has the advantage of reducing the number of children on the playground at any one time, it also provides fewer opportunities for cross age play.

In an earlier study Lindsay and Palmer (1981) surveyed the lunchtime games played by over 4000 children in 21 Brisbane primary schools and concluded that 'the most active playgrounds with the happiest children were those containing the greatest variety of play areas' (p.13). Having ample equipment and space was crucial and surfaces of different composition, such as grass, bitumen, sand and dirt, which allow for a variety of games, were seen to be important. One of their other recommendations was that playgrounds should not be divided into play areas on the basis of age or sex. They argued that children should be allowed to establish their own play areas 'based on needs' (p.13). This is fine if they have the freedom, space, equipment and encouragement to do so. But as schools grow larger with amalgamations, fewer will have the luxury of space.

The reports from teachers clearly indicate that mixed age and mixed gender play appears to be far more commonplace in smaller schools, largely because many of the games children play require the majority to participate in order for them to take place. In the words of one teacher:

> *In our school, with a very small population, and a large playing area there is the opportunity for girls to play their own games if they wish but often*

> *they prefer girls to be involved in these games.*

In the opinion of this teacher, the fact that boys and girls voluntarily and happily played together had a number of very positive outcomes. She wrote:

> *Because the boys and the girls played together they came to see each other in a different light. Boys saw the girls as equally capable players while the girls enjoyed playing with the boys. In bigger schools the girls are often excluded from field games by virtue of boys commandeering the space first or bullying their way. In the larger schools there are enough boys to make up teams without the girls so they miss out on opportunities to play.*

This latter point is made clear by the conversation one teacher had with a group of boys who commandeered the oval each lunchtime to play football. When asked why they did not allow girls to join in the game, they replied:

- Why have girls when there are more than enough boys who want to play?
- Girls don't take the game seriously
- Girls are not good enough
- Girls would rather play with their (girl) friends anyway

Heather Russell (1986) studied children's choice of playground activities in a school with 342 children and found that girls and boys tended to play different games and most were played in single sex groups. She observed that 'the girls generally have poor ball-handling skills' (p.22) and suggested that this may have been because the school playground did not provide them with the necessary space and equipment with which to play games such as netball.

If girls are excluded from certain areas such as large open spaces because boys occupy them for their field games, then the opportunities for girls to learn the skills of throwing, catching, hitting, bowling, running, etc, may well be limited as Russell believed. If, as was reported in one school, getting hold of bats and balls to play with at lunchtimes was a case of 'first in best dressed', then younger children, and girls generally, often miss out, leaving them with few options but to sit around. What is interesting is that some teachers can be heard to express concern about the lack of involvement of girls in games at recess times, yet rarely do they look at whether this is a matter of choice or whether they are denied access.

Sampson (1992), in a comprehensive study of children's play in Victorian primary and secondary schools, found that boys still dominated the open space with their ball games, effectively denying girls the opportunity to play with them or to play games of their choosing in this area. As Sampson noted:

> ... some groups of girls were observed to play on the edges of some ovals but the majority occupied asphalt areas, often patiently accepting disruption by the boys (p.10).

She found that, in some schools, even the asphalt areas were being taken over by boys:

> The increasing popularity of men's basketball meant that the former netball court had to be shared, but what we observed was that twice as many boys as girls now used this space. Even designated netball courts had more boys playing basketball or downball (pp.9-10).

Girls were also disadvantaged when it came to getting access to equipment. Sampson found that boys were always first to get the bats and balls. Even when girls did get some equipment their games were frequently disrupted by boys running through them or taking the ball.

On the basis of what she saw happening in the playground, Sampson concluded that:

> Boys were learning ways of behaving which would lead them to see sport or individual wellbeing as an integral part of their young lives and that girls were not (p.12).

Such findings are consistent with previous studies by Lever (1976), Finnan (1982), Hughes (1988) and Bunker (1991). According to Hughes (1988, p.670):

> The contrast between girls' more passive cooperative games and boys' more aggressive competitive games has been particularly troubling to those concerned about social change. Increasingly, these qualities have been taken to both reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes, implying that change will not come easily.

As Thorne (1993) points out, it is in the playground where the separation of gender is most obvious. 'Activities, spaces, and equipment are heavily gender-typed; playgrounds, in short, have a more fixed geography of gender' (p.44).

Segregating the playground, which is more likely to be the case in larger schools, also potentially limits mixed-age play and the developmental advantages that come with such play. According to Siegal (1982) and Perry and Bussey (1984), mixed age play helps children develop an understanding of fairness and reciprocity and, furthermore, when children of different ages play together, there is more nurturing, accommodation and co-operation and less competition. The older children look after the interests of the younger ones. They ensure that fair play is the order of the day. Decisions are made and disputes are settled by the older and bigger children who assume leadership roles.

In small schools the very existence of the game depends on accommodating the interests and abilities of all members of the group. If not, the game dissolves through lack of players. The older and bigger children realise that, at times, they have to 'play down' in order to give the younger and smaller children a chance. By so doing they learn some important lessons about life. The following extract from a teacher in a school of 24 children illustrates this nicely:

> *The children modify the rules of games to cater for individual differences in skill and height. They bowl underarm to the younger children or bat the opposite hand or throw for goal from further out. They don't tackle the smaller ones. The older children are understanding and patient with the younger ones. They are forced to be creative in thinking up modifications and handicaps in order to make the game a 'fair' contest.*

In the bigger schools decisions are not so much based on the natural hierarchy which age and size provides but on

ability, friendship, knowledge, assertiveness and such things as ownership of the equipment and peer status. Power and control are earned rather than granted and often exercised in fairly ruthless fashion. Given that there are more potential players than are necessary for the game to take place, then some children are privileged and some are denied the opportunity to play. Unlike the smaller school, where the emphasis is, by necessity, on inclusion, in larger schools the process can be quite competitive and exclusive.

CONCLUSION

As a number of studies both here in Australia (Goodnow & Burns 1985; Russell 1986; Evans 1996) and overseas (Blatchford 1989; Blatchford, Creeser & Mooney 1990; Sluckin 1991; Pellegrini 1995) have shown, playtimes, particularly the long lunch break, are very popular with children and, for many, the most enjoyable part of the school day. It provides children with the chance to have a break from work and the classroom, to play with friends and to engage in activities of their own choosing. It is one of the few times in the school day when they are relatively free from adult control although, of course, adults are present in a supervisory capacity during each break. As Russell (1986, p.1) says:

> The playground is the place where friendships are made and broken, games of skill refined and perfected, rituals devised, and taunts, insults and punishments meted out. ... Playtime is crucial for children's socialization and important for their physical development. In the playground children are forced to spend time together; they learn to co-operate and compete with their peers, devise their own codes of conduct, teach others and then practise according to well established rules for hours and hours, often perfecting skills to quite an extraordinary degree.

Unfortunately the significance of playtime and the playground in the child's schooling is not always acknowledged. According to Hall and Abbott (1991) it is no secret that we have been singularly unsuccessful in persuading parents and teachers that play is very important to the intellectual, physical and social growth of the child. There seems to be a universal acceptance that it is important to the pre-school age child but, as Hall and Abbott claim:

> Once children start schooling most parents consider that the 'real' learning has to start and the apparently inconsequential behaviours associated with play must, fairly quickly, be replaced by 'work' (p.2).

According to King (1987), parents expect their children to work when at school, not play, and they believe that it is the teacher's task to see that children do work. There is an implicit assumption that the only serious and worthwhile learning is that which takes place in the classroom, in the presence of the teacher. In this context play is relegated to time between work and its purpose is to provide teachers and children with a break from work. Interestingly, in England, 'breaktime' is the word used to describe recess time (see Blatchford & Sharp 1994).

Recess breaks are therefore justified in relation to work rather than because they are inherently important to children's growth and development. They are 'the scholastic equivalent of the coffee break' according to Donmoyer (1981), a time to 'release surplus energy' (see Evans & Pellegrini 1997), so it is hardly surprising that they are ignored when decisions are made about closing small schools and obliging children to attend larger ones. Glickman's (1984) argument, expressed some time ago, would not be out of place today. In his view:

> The times in which we sit are characterised as essentialist. The political and social climate is one of fiscal austerity and accountability for predetermined ends. Schools have been reduced in budget, staff and materials. Schools are being asked to limit their purpose and to focus on reversing declining achievement scores. Unless research can show the benefits of play to such goals, it will not find a place in today's schools. (p.268)

There is a lot more we need to know about the social dynamics of big schools and small schools but the evidence we have to date suggests that different playgrounds provide different opportunities to play. Where space and equipment are limited, as it often is in big schools, it stands to reason that children will have fewer opportunities to play. Furthermore, because they may have to compete for space and equipment, friction can arise between those who get the resources and those who don't. This can be the forerunner of various forms of anti-social behaviour, including bullying and harassment, as certain individuals or groups impose their will on others.

The recent research by Rigby and Slee (1991), Burke and Jarman (1994) and Slee (1995) clearly indicates that interpersonal violence in the form of teasing, verbal and physical aggression, is a problem in Australian schools and that much of it centres on the playground. As one teacher currently in a large school found, bullying and domination of older children over younger children had reached a stage where something had to be done to protect the victims. The school introduced a segregated playground and, although mindful of the limitations this put on the children's play options, they found that it successfully reduced the incidences of bullying behaviour.

In large schools such compromises are becoming quite common. Unfortunately the playground, in many schools, is now perceived as a 'problem' (see Blatchford 1989; Hann 1993). The safety of all children is a fundamental concern for teachers and parents and, when space and resources are inadequate for the number of children attending the school, then decisions such as segregating the playground or instituting stricter rules about where children can and cannot play become necessary. In some schools the concern about anti-social behaviour has even lead to decisions to reduce the number and length of the recess breaks (see Evans 1997), the assumption being that the less time children have to play the less trouble they will get into and the less need for teacher intervention. This is a disturbing trend but consistent with what is happening overseas. In America, for example, some schools have even eliminated recess altogether because of the persistent problems arising in the playground (see Pellegrini 1995). The elimination of recess breaks has met with little resistance from teachers because it relieves them of the burden of supervision.

No doubt there are advantages for children attending large schools just as there can be disadvantages for children attending small schools, particularly when the numbers are so low that a child may not have another age-mate in the school with whom he or she can play. Playing is a social experience and, in the ideal situation, children should have the opportunity to play with their peers as well as with others of different age and gender. Storrs (1980) makes the point that small rural schools, although often idyllic in their surroundings and in their family atmosphere, can limit children's social and competitive opportunities and give them a false sense of their own abilities. The child who was 'top' throughout his/her primary school may be disillusioned to find themselves 'average' in secondary school. He also points out that the small school limits the number of teachers to whom the children are exposed.

The study of play and playgrounds is still in its infancy here in Australia although it is not as though we haven't been reminded of their importance. Peters (1993; see also Rodwell 1996) drew on articles that appeared in the Sth Australian Education Gazette at the turn of the century to show how teachers were urged 'not to look upon play as superfluous'. During this period the local school provided an important meeting place for the whole community as well as 'an environment conducive to play' (Peters 1993, p.11).

Many small schools still exist and they continue to be important meeting places, particularly in rural communities. It is timely and worthwhile to study the social dynamics of the playground in these small schools, as well as other aspects of the school culture, so that we can make a case for retaining them or, at the very least, see if we can preserve the characteristics that are unique to these schools. The broader curriculum in big schools may have more to offer the child in terms of their academic development but small schools are special places and they should not be abandoned without careful thought being given to the way in which they enrich the growth and development of the child. □

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