What Makes Small School Federations Work? An Examination of Six Instances of Small School Federation in Wales

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ABSTRACT

The future of education in the small rural primary school is frequently under review and one option open to LEAs is to federate schools in an area to form a larger unit under the management of one headteacher. In this study the processes involved in six instances of school federation in Wales are examined. Of these, two federations are well established, two are recently formed and two have reverted to become single schools once more. The article reviews the 'small school' debate and identifies key features that could be retained and created by federating schools. Experiences and perceptions of headteachers and governors involved are examined and salient features of a stable federated school are discussed. The initiation process is also examined and factors that might contribute to the stability of a federated school are identified. The study concludes that federation has the potential of combining the best features of the small rural school with those of a larger unit.

Introduction

In certain rural counties of Wales, the future of primary education is being reassessed and various attempts are being made to rationalize and reorganize with a particular focus on small schools. One of the driving forces behind this has come through the Audit Commission, whose report *Trading Places* (1996) highlighted issues of surplus capacity, school size and cost. Local education

authorities (LEAs) in turn have needed to respond to district audits through their school organization plans (SOPs) in which they assess the need to add or remove school places. Options under consideration include: maintaining the status quo but supporting inter-school collaboration; closure and merger; the federation of schools under one headteacher; and the establishment of new single site 'area schools' through school closure and amalgamation. For some LEAs, federation is seen as a way forward for keeping schools above a certain minimum size. For example, Carmarthenshire in its SOP (Davies, 2001: 20) defines a school as not of necessity meaning provision within a single location but 'area managed, locally taught institutions'. On a national level federation is seen as a viable option as indicated in the key discussion paper 'Rural and Small Schools' (National Assembly for Wales, 2001: 17) in which the Education and Lifelong Learning Minister for Wales recommends that 'authorities should seek to actively explore alternatives to school closure such as federation, clustering and IT networking'.

At this critical point in the debate over the future of small schools, therefore, federation is likely to be considered by LEAs as a serious alternative to closure or merger. Because of this it is both relevant and important to examine the issues surrounding federation and this study aims to do this by focusing on six instances of federations that have occurred in Wales.

The small school

The viability of the small primary school has been the subject of discussion for many years and, within this debate, there has been a tendency to take a common-sense view that these schools are disadvantaged through their limited size. In the context of this discussion attempts have been made to define what constitutes the 'small school'. Galton (1993), drawing on the recommendations of the Plowden Report (CACE (E), 1967: 8) suggests 100 pupils and three teachers as the critical size. Other studies such as those of Keast (1991a, 1991b), Galton et al. (1991) and HMI (Wales) (Welsh Office, 1989, 1992) also use this definition. Plowden advocated the three-teacher school as the minimum, as this provided for three classes each covering two age ranges (para. 480). Where there is a school with four teachers there is more flexibility to organize and manage differently and this could mean that the headteacher would not have to be responsible for a class. Under this critical size, the headteacher has to have responsibility for a class and, in addition, as the school gets smaller, wider age range classes are forced on it. This defines the small school as one with three teachers or fewer and probably fewer than ninety

pupils. Using this definition many of the primary schools in rural Wales can be categorized as small schools. Amongst these are a proportion of schools where the pupil numbers are so low as to warrant only one teacher.

Other definitions of the small school depend on the size thresholds beyond which the cost per pupil rises steeply. These have been brought together by Bell and Sigsworth (1987) and indicate that below a certain threshold costs rise steeply. The point at which this occurs depends on the extent of resources allocated to support the smaller schools and range from eighty pupils to fifty-five pupils. More recent data from Wales (Williams, 1998: 10–11) indicate costs per pupil rising steadily once the school roll falls below ninety, with a sharp rise in schools with less than thirty pupils. The Audit Commission (1996) also set their definition of a small school at ninety pupils for reasons of significantly increasing costs. Clearly, the situation where a number of such small schools exist within close geographical proximity could be considered for rationalization, and federation is one option for such a reorganization.

Different models of federation have been examined in the literature (for example, Coopers & Lybrand, 1996) but for the purpose of this discussion, the term 'federation' refers to the specific situation where separate small schools combine to form a single school using the premises of the former schools, but now with one headteacher and one governing body. According to Coopers & Lybrand (1996: 17), the advantages of this model are the delivery of educational and financial benefits and the reduction of the administrative and budgeting burden. Although others concur with the view that federation may be the best way forward for many small schools (for example, Galton and Hargreaves, 1995) only a small number of federations are actually in existence. Whilst Coopers & Lybrand (1996) see these as stable units, they cite difficulty in initiating and replication as being their main drawbacks.

Federation and the 'small school' debate

There was an ongoing debate through much of the twentieth century concerning the quality of provision and performance of small schools compared with that of larger schools in Wales. The Gittins Report (CACE (W), 1967) raised this issue by casting doubt on the ability of small schools to match up to the provision available in larger units and recommending a minimum of three teachers in a primary school to ensure sufficient curriculum coverage. Subsequent attempts by local authorities in Wales to implement these recommendations through closure and amalgamation have been fraught with problems, however, not the least being objections over the damage the

closure might cause the local communities. Opposition to such closure of small schools on occasions escalated to take on national proportions (Webster, 1991). Following the introduction of the National Curriculum, a prevalent view was that small schools were limited in their range of expertise to cover all subjects (for example, Alexander et al., 1992). The next impetus for review came after April 1996, when a number of the new, smaller unitary authorities that were created in Wales through local government reorganization (LGR) came under financial pressure to start reassessing the future of some of the smaller schools in rural areas. More recently the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW), through its Education and Lifelong Learning Committee, has been conducting a policy review that aimed to set the context for LEAs to develop their strategies on 'school places', thereby reopening and continuing the debate (NAfW, 1998–2001).

In terms of performance, however, there is no hard evidence that small schools are any worse than their larger counterparts and there are some indications from analysis of inspection and test data that they may do better (for example, Ghouri, 1998; Richards, 1997a, 1998), although the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning for Wales maintains that no differences are evident for Wales (NAfW, 2001: 4–5). Jordan and Whitely (1997a: 25) identify a curriculum that 'is responsive to the needs of the individual, and is translated into quality of teaching and learning' as being a major strength of small schools. Critics argue that, in addition to a limited range of teacher expertise, a lack of numbers for peer grouping is a disadvantage for the small school and that there are 'educational benefits from teachers being used to teach more than one teaching group' (Coopers & Lybrand, 1996: 13). Peer teaching and expert input would be a clear advantage in the case of physical education (PE) where smaller schools appear to do less well. Evidence from at least one rural county in Wales indicates that standards are higher in larger primary schools (Williams, 1998) and, whilst such shortcomings may be due to 'constraints in accommodation and resources' (Welsh Office, 1993), these could well be overcome by the combined resources and pooled peer teaching that federation would provide.

It has also been argued that pupils in the small school are socially and emotionally disadvantaged. However, studies indicate that this is not necessarily the case. For example, Francis (1992) found that those attending schools of sixty or fewer were happier and significantly more positive in their attitude than those attending larger schools. Earlier studies highlight other cultural advantages of the small school, in that teachers are able to develop a good knowledge of the children, thereby establishing closer relationships and support (for example, see Gregory, 1975). Jordan and Whitely (1997a: 10) report that small school

headteachers believe the strengths of the small school are linked to 'children who are positive, well behaved, friendly, happy and well motivated' and an 'ethos described in terms of positive relationships and a caring sharing environment in which children are secure' in a community 'where good relationships exist between children, staff, parents, governors and the wider community'. However, in instances where poor relationships exist or the standard of teaching and learning is poor, pupils will clearly suffer disproportionately over a longer period of time in the smaller school.

Kvalsund (1998) found marked differences in relationship patterns between the pupils in smaller schools with mixed age classes and those in the larger schools with single age classes. In the larger schools, segregated social groups were the dominant feature, with children choosing to socialize in small, fairly exclusive same age, same gender groups, whereas children from the smaller schools, whilst experiencing a lower intensity of friendship, chose friends of differing ages and gender in spite of there being sufficient scope to choose differently. In the larger schools competitive interactions were predominant whereas in the smaller schools pupils played collectively and here co-operation was the dominant feature. These social advantages of the small school must be offset against what is seen as the main disadvantage for small school pupils which is the lack of large enough peer groups to facilitate peer socialization, to act as an incentive for certain activities such as sport and to provide peer competition within the classroom. It could be argued, therefore, that the mixed social model that federation provides would give both the security and advantages of the smaller unit along with the benefits of wider socialization if carefully managed.

The proximity of home to school is also important not only in terms of maintaining close parental links but also in minimizing children's travel time. Evidence suggests that, if this is excessive, over 45 minutes for older juniors and less for younger children, it can significantly lower performance (see Findlay cited in Harrison and Busher, 1995). Federation can be a way of keeping the advantages of home–school proximity while still catering for larger peer groups, providing that pupil travel is limited to one or two occasions a week and mainly involves older children.

The main disadvantage to the headteacher of the small school is seen as the heavy load of having both to teach and manage (for example, see Harrison and Busher, 1995; Dunning, 1993). Cooper & Lybrand (1993) refer to the restricted scope for delegation as putting further pressure on the headteacher. Whilst a major incentive for being a headteacher of a small school is to continue teaching (Hayes, 1996; Harrison and Busher, 1995), the dual demands can be seen as such a disadvantage that headteacher posts are difficult

to fill (Williams, 1998). This difficulty is reflected in the recently introduced incentive payments for headteachers of small schools. There is also additional pressure on other teaching staff who are required to take responsibility for more than one curriculum area, often in isolation from colleagues, and evidence indicates that this is reflected in a lower level of curriculum planning in some smaller schools. Inspection reports refer to less developed curriculum planning being apparent in some small schools than in the majority of larger ones (Jordan and Whitely, 1997a and 1997b; Williams, 1998; Richards, 1997b). It has been calculated that federating three schools saves the equivalent of half a post in headteacher time, which could then be used to reduce teaching load (Coopers & Lybrand, 1996: appendix D).

Many of the disadvantages of professional isolation are addressed through close collaboration between schools in catchment or cluster groups where provision of INSET and the sharing of curricular expertise is better catered for through the larger unit, thereby overcoming teacher isolation (see Williams and Thorpe, 1997a, 1997b). The formalization of this collaboration through federation, for the benefit of both staff and pupils, may be seen as the next developmental stage in addressing many of these issues.

Ideally, therefore, the federation should retain the small school characteristics of:

- keeping close community links
- providing a small school 'family' ethos
- being responsive to the needs of individuals
- having happy, secure, well behaved pupils
- providing quality teaching and learning
- being flexible and innovative
- being locally accessible with relatively low pupil travel

at the same time as gaining some of the advantages of a larger unit, which include

- decreasing the overall administrative load
- relieving headteacher pressure caused by a full teaching commitment
- sharing resources
- overcoming pupil and teacher isolation
- facilitating INSET
- sharing curricular expertise
- allowing peer group teaching

- facilitating larger peer group socialization
- catering for specialist subjects such as Welsh, music and PE
- creating a more attractive headteacher post and more opportunities for career development for staff.

Approach

This study examines the factors involved in the initiation and stability of federations and identifies key features contributing to their success. It arises from a larger ongoing longitudinal examination of the small school situation in Wales that has been under way since 1995 through which strategies for support of the small school are being analysed by means of successive question-naire surveys and follow-up interviews (see Williams and Thorpe, 1998). From this, these six instances of federation have been identified and the experiences and perceptions of those involved examined. The federations are located in four of the eight authorities that make up most of rural Wales, that is, the north, mid and west of the country. Of these two are well-established federations, two recently formed and two temporary now reverted.

The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with head-teachers, governors and LEA officers involved with the six federations. Between March and June 1998 an initial round of interviews was conducted with headteachers of each federation and their corresponding LEA officers and chairs of governors from two of the federations. More in-depth follow-up study of two of the federations in the process of establishing took place in 2000 and May 2001. This was supplemented by observation of LEA/school meetings focused on the functioning of one of the federations and the action plan arising from inspection (OHMCI, 1999). Interviewees were sent a list of discussion points beforehand and each interview took place in a school or education office with one researcher conducting the interview and the other taking notes. Interviews lasted about 45 minutes, were conducted in English or Welsh, were taped and later transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured and interviewees were first invited to respond freely to the discussion points and then asked more specific questions to give a full picture.

The first category of discussion points related to establishing the perceived advantages and disadvantages of federation and the mechanics of the process. Aspects that might have changed through federation were focused on such as the headteacher's dual role of managing and teaching; use of resources; use of teacher expertise; curriculum provision; pupil relationships; pupil peer grouping; professional development of staff; and community links. The second

category examined the factors that promoted or hindered the federation process and contribute to stability, such as the prior conditions; the extent of a common culture; history of collaboration; commitment of staff, parents and others; resistance to change; autonomy and competition between the schools; the leadership of the process; and consultation, communication and preparation. The third category covered aspects such as the quality of teaching and learning; managing the curriculum and the impact on pupils. Altogether sixteen interviews were analysed and supplemented by analysis of documentary evidence and notes from public meetings to form the basis of this article. This evidence is described and discussed in the findings under three headings: key features of the 'stable' federated school, the initiation process and stability.

Whilst the findings of this small–scale study may have limited applications in a wider context, they do provide clear indications of the advantages and disadvantages of federation and the factors critical to the success of federating small schools within rural Wales and are likely to be equally valid when applied to schools in similar contexts.

The federations in the study

Federation formation is usually triggered by circumstances such as the inability to fill vacant headteacher posts and is often a temporary expedient. In some cases however, whilst the trigger is similar, the process is taken on board in a more planned way and the change can be led from within the community not only with a focus on saving schools but also for gaining educational benefits. Of the established federations, A was initiated by the LEA but supported by the community and in B and C the initiation came mainly from the schools and communities themselves. The initiation of Federation D, whilst locally supported, ran into difficulties and was temporarily derailed but is now established. Federations E and F were each created as an expedient and did not prove to be stable (see Table 1 for a summary).

Examination of the arrangements and perceptions in A, B, C and D provides evidence relating to the key features of the stable federated school. In each of these the original school buildings are retained as bases, each of which has a designated teacher in charge. The headteacher of each has reduced contact time and works in all bases. In A the headteacher teaches a class for mornings and carries out administration in the bases in the afternoons. In B and D the headteacher does not have his own class but instead teaches his specialist subjects in all bases and in C the time the headteacher spends in bases is used for supporting, teaching and monitoring. The pupils remain in their

Table 1
Summary of the Federations in the Study

Federation	Background	Headteacher	Teaching arrangements
A: three sites one larger site long established	common culture prior history of collaboration LEA instigated, locally supported	half-time class responsibility rotates for administration in base sites	peer group curriculum teaching for one afternoon peer group games and PE for one afternoon
B: three sites similar sized sites established	common culture prior history of collaboration locally instigated, LEA supported	reduced contact time no class responsibility base sites visits for specialist teaching	core taught in bases non core specialist teachers rotate peer group games and PE for one afternoon
C: four sites one larger site recently formed	common culture prior history of close collaboration locally instigated, LEA supported	reduced contact time no class responsibility base site visits for monitoring and support	peer group core curriculum teaching for one day peer group games and PE for one morning
D: three sites one larger site recently formed	common culture prior history of collaboration LEA instigated, locally supported	reduced contact time no class responsibility base sites visits for specialist teaching	peer group teaching for games, PE and some non-core remainder of curriculum taught in bases; larger base contains full primary age range; one smaller base contains KS2 other smaller base contains Reception and KS1 – specialist teachers rotate
E: two sites unstable reverted	different linguistic cultures prior history of collaboration LEA instigated – pragmatic need	limited reduction in contact time class responsibility retained base site visits for administration only	base site teaching only
F: two sites unstable reverted	common culture no prior history of collaboration LEA instigated – pragmatic need	limited reduction in contact time class responsibility retained base site visits for administration only	base site teaching some peer group games and PE some *ad hoc* exchange of pupils

local bases for most of their teaching with amalgamation of some pupils for peer group teaching, games and special occasions. Teachers are allocated curriculum coordinator roles for the whole school and carry out some specialist teaching and support while being mainly responsible for their own classes.

In Federation A, junior pupils are brought together for peer group curriculum teaching for one afternoon and games and PE on another. In B and D peer group teaching occurs only for PE and games with specialist teachers rotating between the bases. In C, juniors are also brought together for one day a week, termed 'Federation Day', when work is focused on core subjects and an approach similar to England's literacy and numeracy hour is adopted. Funding has continued as before federation, in that support has been maintained on the basis of there being individual small schools.

Comparison with the arrangements in E and F, which have since reverted to single schools, gives an indication of factors likely to affect the stability and successful running of a federation. Here, each federation was formed from two schools at the instigation of the LEA because of failure to appoint a headteacher to one of them. In each case the head of a neighbouring school agreed to act as head of both the schools, visiting the other school for administrative duties only while retaining class responsibility in the 'home' school. Further collaboration was limited, with governing bodies and parent– teacher associations remaining separate in both E and F. No joint pupil activities were organized in E, although some peer group games and PE along with ad hoc pupil exchange took place in F.

Findings

Key features of the stable federated school

Interview evidence from the four established federated schools was analysed with a focus on the headteacher's role and responsibilities; the role and responsibility of teaching staff; the management of the curriculum; how the children are affected and community links maintained.

The headteacher's role and responsibilities were seen to have changed significantly in terms of the dual role of teaching and managing. Each of the headteachers were very positive about the federation and saw it as a new opportunity offering a different range of possibilities in both managing and teaching in what is still a relatively small school. The challenge of this role is seen as being quite different from that of a small school headteacher: 'I've been acting head of a school this size before but this is very different . . . you've got

to be very organised' (Fed. C). Over and above the normal headteachers' responsibilities, they need to be seen to share their time appropriately between bases, to manage the movement of pupils and staff, and to communicate to a wider community while still maintaining a teaching responsibility. This could be a source of added pressure and calls for time management skills:

> the part I find most stressful is trying to meet deadlines and to get from one place to another – the travelling in a way . . . it's mostly trying to beat the clock – and if a problem crops up at a unit that has got to be dealt with straight away, then you have got to leave. But it does have advantages in that I haven't got a full time teaching commitment. (Fed. A)

A reduction in teaching time and the removal of responsibility for a class from the headteacher has meant that they can teach to their strengths and share their time teaching between all bases, thereby getting to know the staff and pupils individually. All four headteachers see these measures as essential to being able to carry out the role successfully: 'as well as one day's administration in each base I go round to teach my specialism, geography . . . this is very important because I get to know each child' (Fed. B).

Changes are also significant for the teaching staff and the ways in which they are required to take responsibility for the various areas of the curriculum which can involve travelling, teaching to their strengths and involvement with larger pupil groups depending on the specific model of organization in the federation. Evidence shows that the models of organization and staffing are similar for the four federations. Pupils are mainly taught in their own bases along with some movement of key stage 2 pupils to provide for peer group learning and the rotation of teachers between bases to enable them to teach to their strengths and specialisms. In all four federations, key stage 2 peer groups come together for PE and games and in three of them this is extended to other curriculum areas. The detailed arrangements differ depending on needs and circumstances. In A, for one afternoon each week all key stage 2 pupils come to one base to study a common topic with four different teachers over a twelve-week cycle; in C pupils are brought together one day per week for specialist teaching of numeracy and literacy; and in D peer group teaching focuses on history, music and Welsh. According to one OHMCI report, the weekly formation of peer groups has 'a positive effect on the older pupils allowing them to socialise with other pupils in their peer group' (1999: 1). For all federations, however, younger pupils' movement is limited to only once or twice a term for special events such as concerts and sports days.

For the majority of the week pupils remain in their bases and still have the advantages of the individual attention that a small school is able to provide:

> Parents do appreciate the advantage of the small school base – because the teachers know the children – and we really do know the children – we know their levels, we know who's working and who's not working and you can still chase up the families – you can have that contact easier. (Fed. C)

By managing teaching and learning in this way the possible stress on the individual teachers due to curriculum overload is eased, in that they now need to focus on just one or two curriculum areas as co-ordinators and can draw on the expertise of colleagues for other subjects. Each teacher has responsibility for fewer curriculum areas and has a brief to provide teacher support generally, and often specialist teaching in the junior years is implemented: 'In every teacher's job description there are areas that each is responsible for. We've got more than one area of responsibility each but at least that is beneficial because in a two teacher school you've got at least five or six areas to look after' (Fed. A). Another advantage for teachers is the way professional development can now be organized on the basis of the larger unit so as to overcome professional isolation. The initial priorities of such INSET, however, often relate to issues concerned with and arising from the development and management of the federation.

The more challenging areas of the curriculum for the smaller school can now be managed on a larger scale. In these federations PE, games, Welsh and music fall into this category where larger, more viable groups of pupils can be formed and specialist teaching take place. This is made possible through the pooling of resources within the federation. Another example of the advantages of pooling resources is in C where sufficient funding has been released to hire suitable premises for PE and games. In all these federations the opportunity for team activities is enhanced: 'the children now have an advantage in sport because in small schools you don't have the teams there. Now for instance we've got a netball team which can compete with other schools' (Fed. B).

When forming these federations the impact of the new arrangements on the pupils is a major issue of concern. In particular, a balance between retaining the security that a small school can give while at the same time providing for socialization in larger pupil groups needs to be maintained. In each of these federations pupils are in their home bases for most of the time and therefore are able to experience this security. An inspection report describes the atmosphere in the bases of one of the federated schools as 'happy, safe and

caring environments for pupils' (OHMCI, 1999: 1). This is also seen by headteachers of the federations studied as an important feature:

> I think the small school family ethos is still there – it's just the same really, the parents and the teachers in the base know each other and the children. I think that is the advantage of it actually, that they can still feel safe and secure in their own base and yet they can come out and experience the wider world in a bigger school. (Fed. A)

Other features characteristic of small schools, such as the way in which older and younger pupils interact, also remain evident: 'the children are very very supportive of each other right through – the older children will be very caring of the younger ones – they will play together and when a little one falls they will look after them' (Fed. B).

They also have the opportunity to come into contact with larger groups of pupils of the same and different ages. In the wider community there is further and new socialization:

> The children do interact out of school actually. There's all this to-ing and fro-ing with going to tea with each other and doing things together so its quite nice – they've made so many friends . . . the children do seem happy, they play together, they don't separate out like they did initially, they don't stay in their base school groups at all, they've got friends from other groups. (Fed. C)

In addition pupils get the opportunity to interact with more teachers, which helps ease the transition from primary to secondary schools: 'They get to know more faces and that will help when they go to secondary school. It also helps when the teachers move because they see different teachers and they get into that ethos of different teachers for different subjects' (Fed B).

The extent of pupil travel to different bases for various activities is an important issue. For the younger children travel is kept to a minimum, occurring once or twice a term for key events and for the older children the number of journeys is limited to a maximum of no more than two days per week. The distances travelled are short and parents are made fully aware of the arrangements. In addition to the extra organizing that has to be done there are, of course, also cost implications involved in moving children and teachers between bases and these may be seen as disadvantages. Initially some parents voiced their concerns about this aspect of federation, focusing on how the travel might affect teaching and learning time and pupils' stress.

Forging and maintaining links between the federated school and the

communities is also seen as an important issue. With these stable federations, there existed a prior history of collaboration between the schools, a common culture shared by the communities and the schools are in fairly close proximity to one another. Nevertheless, while being managed by overall governing bodies, in each case parental loyalty and support is maintained through retaining links with the local bases, often through having individual PTAs. The governing bodies include one parent from each base, a teacher representative, the headteacher and various other representatives such as those of the LEA, the community councils and co-opted members. For one federation, the individual PTAs are key in retaining local goodwill and their main activities are related to fundraising, mainly for their own base units, thereby maintaining the local dimension:

> We have three separate PTAs but on occasions they have joint ventures, and certain parents are very good at supporting the other PTAs. One single body was proposed but opposed on several issues; one was that we wouldn't raise as much money and also they can get the support of the local community as separate PTAs. (Fed. C)

This local dimension is often enhanced by factors such as rotating events between the bases, having regular headteacher assemblies in each base and holding staff and consultation meetings in each base in turn throughout the year.

The initiation process

Certain preconditions for the change were in place in the stable federations in that in each of the federations all schools shared a common culture and catered for pupils from similar rural backgrounds, all schools had a history of collaborating very closely over policies, curriculum plans and schemes of work, and in each, the schools already shared the same governing body. This meant that strengthening the collaboration and going that one step further to federation did not involve a massive disruption of what was already current practice.

In B and C a key factor was the way in which ownership of the federation process was taken over by the communities themselves, thereby making it more acceptable and more likely to be viable. Comments from headteachers and governors show how they felt ownership of the process:

> Federation came about through the instigation of the chair and vice chair of governors. When two headteachers retired we went to the governing body and

asked if they would consider working together. We formally asked the LEA if they would consider us working with one head . . . We had a meeting with all parents in a neutral central place . . . we didn't have to do an awful lot of persuading to be honest – we told them the facts, how we saw the best way of overcoming the possible problems. (Chair of Governors, Fed. B)

Closer examination of what happened in C illustrates how the local community reacted to LEA proposals for rationalization which included federation. In this instance the proposals were triggered by the imminent retirement of one of the headteachers. The proposals for rationalization appeared in the press before parents had been properly informed, causing alarm in the local communities. The governors of the 'cluster' of schools reacted by convening a meeting where it was agreed that a delegation should visit an established federation in England. The delegation consisted of an LEA officer, three of the headteachers, and the chair of governing body, with the main aim being to examine organizational aspects. However, an additional lesson learnt from this visit was the emphasis that had been placed on consultation and keeping everyone informed throughout the process of change.

Following this visit, the issue was left in abeyance by the LEA for four months. During this period two significant developments took place. The LEA proposed that the smallest of the four schools be amalgamated with a larger town school outside the cluster which, although geographically close, had a significantly different culture. This would not only have been a disruption to the pupils but also the loss of this one school was seen as threatening the financial viability of the proposed federation in that the provision of non-contact time for the headteacher would be less feasible. Matters were then brought to a head when one of the headteachers took up a post elsewhere, making the possibility of school closures even more real.

At this point the governing body decided to push ahead with the consultation process. The chair of governors and the remaining headteacher took the key leadership role in managing the consultation process in what could be described as a bottom-up proactive approach. A key meeting of teachers, school ancillary staff, parents, governors, members of the community, LEA representatives, councillors and union representatives was held to discuss the options further. This was followed by meetings held in each of the four localities, together with a postal poll of all parents organized by the governors. The result showed that federation was by far the preferred option in each of the schools. This approach kept everyone informed of developments at each

and every stage thus allaying fears and uncertainties that might have arisen through lack of communication. Federation C opened in September 1998 and is now well established.

In D there was also a common culture and a degree of community ownership of the process but other difficulties arose. The size of the schools varied considerably with forty-five in one, twenty-eight in the other and eleven in the third, with the latter under serious threat of closure. The parents were in support of federation when they met with the LEA and staff accepted the proposals providing salaries were protected. Parents and governors supported some aspects of the proposed change, such as the lessening of pressure on the staff, and the change in headteacher role, that is, only teaching for two days a week and using the remaining time for managerial tasks. However parents of the largest school questioned whether federating would have an overall benefit to their pupils and had to be convinced that specialist teaching would be available under federation, particularly in music, special educational needs (SEN) and Welsh. They also needed assurance that their present headteacher, who was to be the head of the new school, would be based in the largest and not 'lost' to the other two schools. Similar concerns had been encountered when Federation A was formed: 'opposition mainly came from the larger school because the parents felt they were losing out because the previous head was from here and the fact that he was being taken away to spend his time here was objected to' (Fed. A).

All plans for the new school to open in September 1998 were in place by the summer term but support for this was disrupted and rapidly dissipated when the headteacher of the larger school, who was to be the head of the new federation, took up a headship in another area. In addition, insecurity over the basis of the future funding of the federated school raised further concerns. The understanding was that the funding would continue to be on the basis of three separate small schools but doubts were raised over this and assurances could not be given that this basis of funding would continue. The process faltered at this stage and it was only later when financial assurances were given that negotiations reopened and the federation was successfully formed under a newly appointed headteacher.

Three major concerns over federation arise from these two examples. First is the concern about continuity of the additional financial support that they currently receive because they are 'small schools'. Second is the issue of staff retention and protection of salary and status. The third involves the perceptions amongst parents regarding the gains to be made through federating. For parents in the smaller schools, federation is seen primarily as a

preferred option to closure and amalgamation in which the school can be retained as a living entity at the heart of the community and pupils can continue to experience a small school ethos. For the parents of the larger school, as they feel more secure regarding possible closure, the process could be viewed as one of loss, in that they are supporting the smaller schools and sharing their headteacher with other schools. Here the educational benefits for all needed to be the prime motivating factor. The additional survival factor also has to be recognized in that with federation they have one school that cannot be classed as a 'small school' and 'cannot be picked off' if the issue of surplus capacity is raised once more.

From these examples certain factors emerge which appear to be influential in the establishing of federations. First, there is the need for certain preconditions such as a history of close collaboration between the schools, preferably with one joint governing body, a common culture and schools that are geographically linked. Secondly, consultation and communication must be thorough and include all those involved at all stages. Information about and experiences of other federations must be sought and shared. Any issues that could give rise to uncertainties must be clarified and agreed. These may include:

- the basis of funding;
- deployment, roles, responsibilities, status and salaries of staff;
- the organization and management of the new school;
- why and when pupils and staff move between bases;
- and the availability and accessibility of the headteacher.

Some assurance must be given that this reorganization will give stability and not lead to further reorganization or site closure. In a federation where one school is seen to dominate because it is larger than the others it is important that the educational benefits for all schools are emphasized and that they all stand to gain. Thirdly, where the driving force for the change comes from within the communities themselves, supported by the LEA, the feeling of ownership amongst parents, governors and school staff is a powerful motivating and sustaining factor.

Stability

Federations E and F were created as an expedient and neither was stable. They reverted to individual schools after two years. In these cases one headteacher had responsibility for two schools but retained his/her class responsibility,

teaching for three days a week and carrying out administration in each base for the other two. The schools remained separate entities and therefore involved more administration and, because only two small schools were involved in each case, the arrangement did not generate sufficient resources to allow a significant easing of the headteachers' managerial and teaching workload. The headteachers had to continue maintaining responsibility for a class and this could not always be met fully if they were called away to the other school. One of the headteachers was concerned that this conflicted with professional responsibility to the children:

> I felt that everything was at the expense of my class . . . I felt I was neglecting them although I was arranging the curriculum for them when I wasn't here . . . and there were times when I had to leave the class here to run to the other school because of some problem or other they couldn't deal with – I think that was absolutely wrong (Fed. E).

The schools in this federation, whilst being geographically close and having a history of cooperation through the 'cluster' group of neighbouring schools, did not have a shared linguistic and cultural background and had separate parental and governing bodies. This made the likelihood of permanent federation more difficult. The headteacher felt overburdened by the extra responsibility and, on review, did not wish to continue with the arrangement after a two-year trial.

In Federation F the schools were more distant from one another but were similar in background and were able to work closely over similar themes and in bringing pupils together for some activities. Governors, however, were wary over federation and saw it very much as an expedient rather than a planned strategy for the future. According to the headteacher, this was the main reason it did not continue: 'There was potential there. Had certain steps been taken to plan prior to the federation I think we would have come closer to a partnership – but, as it stood you didn't feel it was a partnership – it was pure necessity'(Fed. F).

Federation as a change process

If the initiation and stability of these federations is viewed in terms of introducing change into an educational setting then the reasons for their relative success and failure can be explored further. For example, Fullan (1991), when examining the criteria teachers use in assessing any given change,

summarizes them in terms of balancing reward and costs with questions such as:

Does the change address a potential need?
How may the students be affected?
How will it affect the teacher in terms of time, energy, sense of excitement and interference with existing priorities?
How rewarding will the experience be? (Fullan, 1991: 127–8)

If the cases of federations E and F are viewed from the headteachers' standpoint it can be seen that, whilst there was some room for professional growth through the change, there were also costs in terms of interference with existing priorities, in particular through the effect on their own pupils' progress, as well as the extra costs in terms of time and energy. Whereas from the viewpoint of the headteachers of federations A, B, C and D, the balance of rewards and costs were for the most part in favour of the change, particularly in terms of gains for the pupils and opportunities for professional development. In addition, in the case of federations B and C, the sense of ownership was probably key to the success of the change – as Ellsworth (2000: 71) puts it: 'Buying into the process with one's own time, effort and ideas . . . contributes to a sense of ownership in the innovation.' Ely, when considering the 'environmental conditions that promote change', also highlights the importance of participation and support of key players and other stakeholders for the success of any change (Ely, 1990: 300–3). Clearly, these were key factors in determining the success or failure of the federations in this study.

Conclusion

The main benefit of federation is that it formalizes and regularizes some of the practice common in clustered schools, such as peer group socializing and learning together. It also facilitates specialist curriculum input without losing the opportunity of continuing to meet individual needs and still retains the family ethos of the small school. Children's travel is kept to a minimum, which is an important consideration for parents. Staffs are less pressured, less isolated and are able to further their professional development through collaborating with one another and developing INSET programmes to meet both individual and school needs. In addition, specific areas such as PE, SEN, Welsh and music can be more adequately catered for through the larger unit. The headteacher has time available to manage the school and is able to retain a

teaching commitment and therefore have first-hand knowledge of the practical aspect of managing and implementing the curriculum. The most appropriate arrangement would appear to be for the headteacher to teach and support in all bases rather than have responsibility for a class, thereby getting to know all children and working closely alongside staff. Federation could be seen as a new challenge for many headteachers of small schools and could make the role more attractive because of the greater scope to be proactive and creative in the way the school is managed. In addition, community links, support and goodwill are maintained, ideally through a mixture of a joint governing body and individual unit based parent–teacher associations.

In setting up a federation certain prerequisites need to be in place, ideally a common culture, a history of collaboration and a joint governing body. It would seem that the process is triggered when one or more of the schools are under threat of closure, when a headteacher retires or moves, or when the LEA is required to respond to pressures to restructure. Where the establishment of a federation has succeeded, the driving force often comes from within the community rather than being imposed externally. Headteachers, governors and councillors have taken the initiative in these cases and have played a major role, with the support of the LEA, in structuring and taking part in the consultation. Where schools are not of similar sizes there was a particular need to highlight the educational benefits to the larger school as well as to the smaller ones. Communities being served by individual sites must be assured they retain the same security against closure as they did prior to federation. According to the NAfW paper *Rural and Small Schools*, regulations on this specific issue are likely to be amended soon in Wales (2001: 19). Adequate funding is crucial and this can best be secured through at least three schools being in the federation and the continued allocation of funding on an individual school basis.

One way forward for small school collaboration could well be through the use of ICT as, for example, in Ceredigion, where four schools are being supported in collaboration through the introduction of an ICT project called Y Ddolen Ddysgu (The Learning Link). These schools are resourced with the most recent technology, including interactive whiteboards and video conferencing equipment which is to be used to facilitate the inter-school co-operation.

Whatever model is adopted, the federating of small schools appears to have a great deal of potential. Through federation the best features of the small rural school can be retained and developed along with the advantages of a larger unit. Federation is not a way of saving money in the short term, and will only successfully fulfil its educational potential if funded adequately.

Notes

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