Contemporary Issues in the Small Rural Secondary Schools of Wales

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ABSTRACT

The current and past issues affecting education in the small, rural secondary school are reviewed, with particular reference to the nature and quality of the educational provision in these schools and to the services provided by the school for its customers – the pupils and the wider local community it may serve. Past discussions of the position of the small rural secondary school are reviewed and their relevance to the current position of these schools is considered. The current study looks at educational provision in small rural secondary schools in five Welsh local authority areas. It is examined by looking at the delivery of the curriculum, staffing, school buildings and their maintenance, community use and Local Education Authority financial and profesional support.

The article reviews both past and current discussions of the role of such schools in an evolving education system and countryside.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine current issues facing small rural secondary schools at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The relative smallness of these schools has been an issue for pupils, teachers, parents, their communities and policy-makers in Wales for many years, with education authorities attempting to maintain a balance between quality and accesibility of educational provision in rural areas.

Two documents published by the National Assembly of Wales – *The Learning Country* (2001) and a report entitled *Rural and Small Schools* (2000) – show current attempts in Wales to address these issues.

Evidence from research into small schools in Wales can contribute to a better understanding of the policy issues involved and thus contribute to the formulation of future policies by Local Education Authorities (LEAs).

Background

A research study of small rural secondary schools in Wales was conducted in 1999. For the purposes of the study, small schools were identified using the Audit Commission's criteria, namely 11–18 schools with a roll of fewer than 700 pupils and 11–16 schools with a roll of fewer than 600 pupils. In 1998–9, fifty-seven schools in Wales fell into this category, of which twenty-four could be classed as having a rural catchment area. Similar schools exist throughout the UK, with concentrations in certain parts of Scotland, Northern Ireland and England.

Studies of small rural schools in Wales

Several studies of rural schools and education in Wales have been undertaken in the past, mainly concerning the primary school sector. Some have been government reports, for example, *Primary Education in Wales*, commonly known as the Gittins Report (1967). More recent research has been undertaken by Williams and Thorpe (1997a, 1997b, 1998) looking at in-service training, professional development, collaboration between schools and trainee-teacher mentoring within primary schools. In addition, the Schools Council Committee for Wales (1983) looked at case-studies of small rural primary schools in Wales and parts of England.

The main studies relating to rural secondary schools in Wales are those by Morgan (1988) and Webster (1991). Morgan was commissioned by the then Dyfed County Council to look at the position of three schools in that county, namely Tregaron; Pantycelyn in Llandovery and Dewi Sant in St David's, all classed as 'small' schools. The objectives of that study were four-fold, to:

a) look at the current provision in those schools;
b) suggest an appropriate curriculum, incorporating breadth, balance, relevance and differentiation;

c) consider the maintenance and enhancement of the curricular opportunities at that time;
d) suggest a phased programme for the implementation of changes.

An audit and background study of the situation in each school was undertaken. It covered curricular arrangements, staffing and staff morale, pupil numbers and community provision.

As a result, two action plans were presented as possible ways forward for these schools. The first aimed to encourage schools to become involved in curriculum review and renewal. The second plan attempted to provide a possible programme for change within these schools.

The report (Morgan, 1988) concluded with a series of discussion papers and appendices including five case-studies, including that of school 2, which is in this current study.

Webster (1991) looked at five schools in Wales and the communities they served. Three – schools P1 and P2 in the current study, and Cardigan – were classed as rural schools and they remain so. In his work, Webster looked at these schools in the context of falling rolls and the 'economic squeeze' of the 1980s. He and Morgan referred to the contribution of flexible learning techniques and of Technical and Vocational Education (TVEI).

Webster's main concern, however, was the curricular provision for pupils in years 12 and 13. He considered the limited subject choices available, delivered to small groups at a considerable cost per head, as a weakness, when compared with provision in larger schools. He also raised questions about the educational experience of pupils in small schools, but without much consideration of the possible benefits. Several education authorities were considering plans for providing their post-16 education in sixth-form or tertiary colleges at the time, but only the south Gwynedd plan was implemented.

These articles were the precursors of the present study. However, they refer to the period prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act and the sea-change in education that has occurred since that time. These earlier studies identified some of the issues to be explored in this article, including curriculum breadth and organization, intra-school collaboration and the need for professional development.

The definition of small rural secondary schools in Wales

In 1999, there were fifty-seven small secondary schools in Wales – fifteen 11–16 schools with fewer than 600 pupils and forty-two 11–18 schools with

fewer than 700 pupils. All were non-selective comprehensive schools. Categorizing the schools into three sub-groups helps to highlight some features of the provision they offer, based on the age of pupil intake, the school location and its linguistic characteristics.

Some patterns emerge in Table 8.1. More than half the small schools are in urban areas with a population greater than 10,000, and were schools established over a century ago, a pattern retained as authorities balance the cost of retaining the status quo against the cost of reorganization.

Where reorganization has taken place, sixth-form colleges serve a number of smaller 11–16 schools. However, more than two-thirds of the small schools in Wales are 11–18 comprehensives.

Two types of small bilingual schools are identified in this study – 'natural' and 'designated' (as defined by their LEAs). Natural bilingual schools accept a very high percentage of the secondary pupils living in the school's catchment area, whatever their mother tongue, and attempt to teach them, wherever possible, in the language of their choice in every subject. In the case of designated bilingual schools, however, Welsh is the language of instruction in all or almost all of their subjects. All the secondary schools are 11–18 schools. The sample of schools in this study is composed of ten of the twenty-five small secondary schools. In addition, one of the small urban schools was included for comparative purposes.

In selecting the ten rural schools, an attempt was made to obtain a cross-section of the various categories of schools listed in Table 8.2, as well as a good geographical spread. A greater number of schools from Gwynedd is included (five), as they can be further subdivided into three 11–18 schools and two 11–16 schools.

Table 8.1
Subgroups within the small secondary schools, *All Wales*, 1999

	11–16 schools	**11–18 schools**
Urban	10	21
Rural	5	21
	11–16 schools	**11–18 schools**
Natural bilingual	7	9
Designated bilingual	0	10
English medium	8	23

Table 8.2
Distribution of schools

	11–16 schools	11–18 schools
Natural bilingual	2	5
Designated bilingual	0	1
English medium	0	3
Geographical distribution	**Number of survey schools**	**Number of small schools in each county**
Gwynedd	5	10
Powys	2	4
Ceredigion	1	2
Carmarthenshire	1	3
Pembrokeshire	2	2

In selecting schools to participate in the study, an attempt was made to get as diverse a selection as possible, within the parameters set – geography, age range and language of instruction. The questionnaires used in the study were piloted in two schools prior to the round of visits.

Data collection

Data was collected from each survey school regarding the numbers on the roll, pupil age-range, the locality served and language(s) of instruction. Ten of the eleven schools surveyed returned their questionnaires. Linguistically, the schools in the study fell into four categories, on the basis of the percentage of children coming from 'Welsh-speaking' homes – where at least one parent spoke Welsh with their children. Table 8.3 outlines the general pattern.

In addition, the headteachers or their deputies were interviewed, in order to ascertain the detailed characteristics of their schools. The audiotapes were

Table 8.3
Percentage of pupils from Welsh-speaking homes

Fewer than 25%	26–50%	51–75%	76%+
M	G1	E2	G2
P1	CN1	P2	G3
E1	–	C	G4

then transcribed. The questions asked provided a comprehensive view of the schools' current positions, enabling the following research questions to be answered:

1. How do schools respond to their rurality and size ?
2. What do schools perceive to be the distinctive features of small rural secondary schools?
3. How do LEAs support small rural secondary schools so as to maximise their perceived benefits?

Analysis of data from the Survey Schools

Data provided by the interviews and questionnaires are shown in Table 8.4. The data suggest that there are four main topic areas which should be considered in any attempt to clarify the specific issues that concern small rural secondary schools. These are: delivery of the curriculum; school buildings; use of those buildings; and staffing and education authority support.

1. Delivery of the curriculum

Much of the 11–16 curriculum in Wales at the time of this study was prescribed by the National Curriculum (NC) for Wales (1996), now superseded by the revised NC (2000). In order to provide sufficient time for the delivery of both core subjects (Welsh, English, mathematics and science) and non-core subjects, schools have manipulated the time available by varying lesson length and the number of lessons per day, and by the use of one- or two-week timetables. In Figure 8.4, for example, six of the schools were shown to have a timetable of six fifty-minute lessons per day, whereas four schools teach five lessons per day of sixty minutes each. Five schools use two-week timetables (P2, C, E2, G4 and CN), four of these being the smallest schools in this survey. Three schools (G1, C and E2) were able to offer one additional discrete subject to KS3 pupils, either information technology or drama. Information technology in the other schools was taught as a separate, timetabled subject, as well as being included in subject lessons. In the remaining schools, IT was delivered within other subject lessons.

It should be noted however that six of the remaining schools did offer drama at some stage within KS3, for example within English or Welsh lessons. Two other features of the KS3 provision should also be noted here. Pupils were placed in ability groups at some point in all but one of the study schools. Two schools introduced setting at the beginning of year 7, whereas the remainder introduced it gradually, usually in the core subjects, and then extended it to non-core subjects.

Table 8.4
School data

Name	County	Type of school	No. of pupils		Medium of instruction	No. of deputy heads	Full-time staff	Part-time staff	Pupil to teacher ratio	No. of lessons on timetable
			1994/5	1998/9						
P1	Powys	11–18	480	605	Mainly English	2	39	7	1:14	6
E2	Pembrokeshire	11–18	525★	475	Designated bilingual	1	32	5	1:13	8
G2	Gwynedd	11–18	380	465	Naturally bilingual	2	28	2	1:15	5
CN	Carmarthenshire	11–18	398	450	Naturally bilingual	2	31	2	1:14	5
M	Merthyr Tydfil	11–18	?	420	English	1	25	?	1:16	6
G4	Gwynedd	11–16	389	414	Naturally bilingual	2	21	4	1:18	5
G3	Gwynedd	11–18	405	408	Naturally bilingual	2	29	1	1:13	6
E1	Pembrokeshire	11–18	329	365	English	1	24	5	1:13	6
C	Ceredigion	11–18	318	352	Naturally bilingual	1	22	7	1:13	6
G1	Gwynedd	11–16	326	320	Naturally bilingual	2	22	1	1:14	6
P2	Powys	11–18	291	263	Naturally bilingual	1	21	1	1:13	5

★ E2 was naturally bilingual

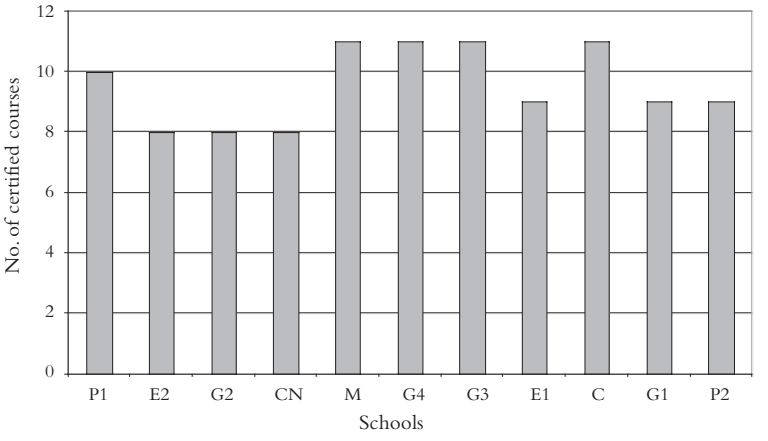
The language of instruction varied across the sample. The curriculum is delivered bilingually in the four Gwynedd schools in the survey. Two of the other schools teach only through the medium of English – E2 and M. School P1 teaches mainly through the medium of English, whereas E1, on the other hand, teaches mainly through the medium of Welsh. This is due to the nature of their respective catchments.

For pupils in Key Stage 4, there is a common core of subjects which must be taught – English (language and literature), Welsh (language), science, mathematics, physical education and personal health and social education. Welsh literature is also available as a subject to first-language Welsh speakers in all the study schools, apart from E2 and M.

Beyond this core curriculum, the study schools offered a variety of optional subjects leading to qualifications at varying levels – GCSE, CoEA, NVQ and GNVQ. The graph in Table 8.5 shows the total number of subjects offered at 16+ in each school. The schools are listed from largest (on the left) to the smallest.

The usual option subjects available at GCSE were a modern foreign language, history, geography, religious education, music, art, design and technology, food technology and physical education. Four schools also offered business, drama and IT. In addition, three schools offered either a GCSE or

Table 8.5
Number of certified courses offered according to size of study schools



a CoEA qualification in some of these subjects, but these were not discrete courses. However, Table 8.5 seems to suggest that there is no correlation between the size of the school and the choice of subjects available to pupils; the Pearson Correlation Coefficient is r2 = 0.5584, indicating that there is no significant correlation.

One school, C, had moved further than others in the direction of vocational qualifications. At the time of the survey, it offered business, leisure and tourism, and health and social care at GNVQ level. One other school, M, offered one GNVQ in manufacturing, because of the industrial nature of its catchment area. Both these schools are responding, to some extent, to Webster's criticism (1991) of subject provision in such schools in the past.

When the post-16 curriculum is considered, only nine schools remain in the survey, as G1 and G4 are 11–16 schools. The remaining schools offered the following ten subjects at A level – Welsh (as either a mother tongue or a second language), English, French, mathematics, geography, history, art, biology, chemistry and physics. Eight schools also offered music and design and technology, while six offered religious education and three offered drama.

Individual schools were able to offer other A-level courses based either on the expertise of one or two members of staff or on the availability of self-supported study courses, mainly available from the Anglesey Further Education College at Llangefni (identified by ⋆). The subjects available in individual schools were economics, electronics⋆, sociology⋆, politics, general studies, psychology, computers, business, home economics, Spanish and German. Two schools timetabled pupils to attend local further education colleges, thus extending the range of subjects at those schools – G3, where pupils attended Coleg Menai for business studies and Coleg Meirion Dwyfor (Glynllifon) for agriculture courses, and E1, where pupils attended Coleg Ceredigion for computer studies.

Eight of the nine schools offered various GNVQ and NVQ qualifications. Health and social care and business were the most commonly offered (both available in six schools). Leisure and tourism was also available in three schools.

Subjects at post-16 level are usually taught in five or six lessons a week, each of fifty to sixty minutes in length. All nine schools taught at least some lessons to combined year 12 and 13 groups, but this varied between subjects and schools.

However, post-16 education in Wales was about to change at the time of this study, with the introduction of AS-, A2- and AE-level courses. The main

effect of this change was that schools were now rarely teaching year 12 and 13 pupils together in the same classroom. The creation of ELWa (Education and Learning Wales) in 2000 indicated that further change was envisaged in Wales.

This suggests that small secondary schools were having to work very hard to offer and maintain as varied a choice of subjects as possible at GCSE and A level, despite financial, staffing and timetabling constraints. This created staffing, timetabling and financial tensions within these schools as they attempted to respond to some early signs of a drift of pupils, across the age range, to larger, neigbouring schools.

Special needs education was a strong feature in the study schools. The proportion on the special needs register in the eleven schools ranged from 4 per cent to 21 per cent, the average figure being 17 per cent, with three of the smallest schools actively marketing their expertise in this field. Types of provision to meet the needs of these pupils varied, as can be seen in Table 8.6. However, at the time of this study, two LEAs were reassessing their strategies in relation to statementing of pupils in an attempt to widen provision, with more money being spent on more pupils at stages 1–3 of the Code of Practice.

Three schools were particularly committed to the support of special needs pupils, namely E2, M and C, with two of the headteachers believing that their successes in this field actually attracted pupils from beyond the catchment area to the school. School E2 had recently won a Basic Skills Quality Mark for its whole school approach and School M had been awarded a grant by the Basic Skills Agency.

However, schools are measured by the public mainly in terms of their examination results. Table 8.7 shows the results for each school for 1998–9, as well as the results for the county where it is situated.

Table 8.6
SEN provision

Types of provision	Number of schools that provide such provision
SENCo (Special Education Needs Coordinator)	10
NNEBs (nursery nurses)	6
Learning support	6
Pupils mainly taught in mainstream classes	9
Use of core subject specialists in SEN dept.	3
Staff paid directly by LEA	2

Table 8.7
Public examination results 1998–9

School	GCSE % A*-C		GCSE Av. Scores		% SEN
	School	County	School	County	
P1	74	55	19	18	21
E2	77	51	20	18	11
G2	57	52	18	16	18
CN	63	52	18	16	32
M	21	39	12	14	4
G4	64	52	–	–	18
G3	55	52	17	16	14
E1	68	51	16	18	13
C	45	57	18	21	29
G1	44	52	–	–	21
P2	46	54	18	18	20

Note: GCSE/A-level courses are not studied in these schools.

In Table 8.7, although at first sight there would appear to be a relationship between size of school and the level of examination results, the sample is too small and the catchment areas too variable in character for any firm conclusions to be drawn about such a relationship. In addition, small rural secondary schools, like all other schools, provide extra-curricular opportunities for their pupils, but these can be affected by transport problems and are dependent on parents' goodwill.

2. School buildings

Study-school buildings varied greatly in quality, age (built from 1616–1985) and therefore suitability for the task of delivering a modern curriculum. Some catered solely for the secondary-school population, whereas others provided facilities for local primary schools or for the community at large. As regards specialist facilities (workshops, laboratories, and so on) – most of the schools were reasonably endowed, with six schools having three or more design and technology workshops and five having three or more laboratories. These, however, were in constant use, and four schools had adapted the school building to provide a mini-lab for small sixth-form groups in order to relieve the pressure on existing laboratories. Two other schools were contemplating similar plans.

Under funding regulation changes in the year 2000, the upkeep of school buildings became the responsibility of schools, with money delegated to them for that purpose. At the time of this study, all the schools in the survey had chosen to opt back into their LEA schemes, repaying the delegated sums to their authorities. However, School C was experimenting with a 'half-way-house' scheme, involving cleaning services. Two other schools were considering similar steps.

Considering the small number of 'temporary' classrooms in the survey schools (M and P1 being the exceptions, with six each), it appears that pressure on space is not a great problem. Indeed, many had notional 'spare places', according to their LEAs and to the Audit Commision.

3. Community use of school buildings

This aspect of school provision has been emphasized recently in National Assembly documents such as *The Learning Country* (2001), with particular reference to lifelong learning.

Three of the survey schools already had well-established community use of their facilities in 1999. Table 8.8 identifies the main categories of use in survey schools as adult evening classes. However, one of the schools, E1, had high levels of community provision, due to the LEA's support for its very rural catchment area. On the school campus, local residents were able to make use of a theatre and cinema as well as classrooms in the evenings. The Community Education Officer's office was also on the campus.

Those schools with community libraries felt that the library contributed a great deal to the school, in that a greater stock of books was available for pupils, whilst also providing a valuable resource for the community. A part-

Table 8.8
Facilities shared with local community

Facilities shared with community	Numbers of schools
Evening Classes:	9
Most popular – Welsh	5
– ICT	6
Library	4 + 1 proposed
Simtra centres	2
Sports fields	1
Swimming pool	1
Gymnasium	1

time librarian worked in three of the libraries, allowing pupils to be better guided in their use of the library facilities. Given the pattern of shared facilities, it can be seen that secondary schools in rural areas can serve an important community purpose, not provided by the primary sector.

4. Staffing

Staff in the survey schools were divided into five different categories for the purposes of this study, three of which (1–3 below) will be discussed in some detail. The categories are:

1. The management team (headteacher, deputies and senior teachers)
2. Full-time teachers
3. Part-time teachers
4. Administrative staff
5. Technical staff
6. Classroom assistants

(i) The management team

Most of the schools were led by experienced headteachers, but in P2 and G3 headteachers had been in post for less than two years. In seven of the schools, the headteacher was supported by two deputies. Of the remaining four schools, all had one deputy, with three schools also employing a senior teacher. It should also be noted that five of the headteachers did some teaching and, in two cases, they taught subjects at A level that would not otherwise be available at the school. There was no correlation between the number of pupils in a school and the size of the management team.

The portfolios of responsibilities held by headteachers, deputies and senior teachers varied between schools, but some common threads emerged. Heads usually maintained an overview of everything going on in the school, at all levels. Five were in charge of curriculum issues and eight took responsibility for their school's budget. All deputy heads taught a light timetable. Six were in charge of curriculum issues, but all other aspects of management were divided between team members, with no consistent pattern of delegation and control emerging.

(ii) Full- and part-time teaching staff

In the case of full-time teaching staff (Table 8.9), a significant relationship existed between the number of pupils and the number of full-time staff. However, the same pattern did not occur in relation to part-time staff.

Eight of the eleven schools have a teacher to pupil ratio of either 1:13 or

Table 8.9
The number of full-time and part-time staff in relation to the number of pupils

School	No. of pupils	No. of full-time staff	No. of part-time staff
P1	605	39	7
E2	475	32	5
G2	465	28	2
CN	450	31	2
M	420	25	?
G4	414	21	4
G3	408	29	1
E1	365	24	5
C	352	22	7
G1	320	22	1
P2	263	21	1

1:14. Of the remaining three schools, one (G2) has a significantly higher ratio of 1:18. This may be due in part to the fact that it is one of the 11–16 schools in the survey. Such schools may then choose to staff other subjects by appointing part-time subject specialists, rather than full-time 'jacks of all trades', but no detailed data on staffing was provided by the schools. Other important factors relating to the work of teachers are their hours of contact with pupils and the number of subjects they teach. There semed to be no definite pattern here, but four schools did have very high contact-time levels, with three of the schools having an average level of above 0.85.

These issues point to a need for greater staff flexibility in small schools and an ability to teach more than one subject. Two-thirds of the schools require at least half their staff to teach more than one subject. Indeed, two of the schools went so far as to say that only the heads of English and maths taught their own subject exclusively. These were schools G4 and M, which also had the second highest teacher to pupil ratio.

The final element of staffing covered by the survey was professional development through in-service training. All headteachers emphasized the importance of this element of their provision for one- or two-person departments in their schools, reflecting points raised by Williams and Thorpe (1997a) in the primary context.

All the schools allocated days for in-school training, as well as for LEA and commercially provided courses. Some smaller schools used a system of

'cascading' knowledge and experience within their schools, from senior and other members of staff, thereby cutting costs, but possibly reducing opportunities. In most schools, staff outlined their annual requirements, which usually included attending examination board courses and others provided by their LEA or commercial providers. Provision varied greatly among the surveyed authorities, from a completely bilingual service in Gwynedd to the very small in-house provision in Powys and Pembrokeshire.

5. LEA support for small rural secondary schools

No study of the provision of education services in rural Wales would be complete without discussion of LEA provision. In looking at the services provided by the LEAs in this study, some general statistics (shown in Table 8.10) should be considered.

The total population densities of the various LEAs in this study are shown in Table 8.10, with a range of 0.4 to 0.07 persons per hectare in the rural counties. Merthyr Tydfil's and Ceredigion's populations were much smaller than those of the other LEAs in the survey, but with Ceredigion covering a geographical area at least sixteen times greater than that of Merthyr Tydfil. These statistics emphasize the rurality of all the counties in the study, apart from Merthyr Tydfil.

Also shown in Table 8.10 is the pattern of secondary schools within the LEAs. Three sets of figures stand out in this table: a) the preponderance of large schools in Pembrokeshire; b) the large number of small, 11–16 schools in the districts of Dwyfor and Meirionydd, in Gwynedd, feeding into the area's sixth-form colleges at Pwllheli and Dolgellau; and c) it should be noted that there are no schools with over a thousand pupils in either Powys or Merthyr Tydfil, as there are in all the other counties.

The funding formula used by LEAs to apportion funds is based on pupil numbers and the basic curriculum entitlement. Additional support is provided for small secondary schools. However, precise figures are difficult to obtain. In addition, most of the schools in the survey were providing a bilingual education for some or all of their pupils, resulting in further budgetary allowances by LEAs to those schools.

Another issue for LEAs is the existence of surplus places in secondary schools, acording to Audit Commission criteria. Both rural and urban LEAs have secondary schools with 10 per cent of surplus places, or more. The Audit Commission has therefore been pressing authorities to reduce or remove these surplus places, despite net inward migration into the study area, as identified by county councils.

Table 8.10
General LEA statistics

County	Pop. (000s)	Area (hect.)	Pop. per hect.	No. of secondary schools	No. of secondary school pupils	Average no. of pupils per school	No. of Schools with pupils			Net current expenditure on sec. schools 1998/9	% of pupils with 5 A*–C grades or more	% of pupils with 2 A levels/ GNVQs or more
							<500	500–1000	1000+			
Carmarthenshire	170	239,337	0.7	25	12,107	807	3	9	3	35.3	53	57
Powys	127	511,938	0.5	13	8,433	649	1	12	0	26.2	55	66
Gwynedd	117	254,859	0.445	14	7,496	535	9	4	1	22.6	52	55
Pembrokeshire	113	159,362	0.7	8	8,069	1,009	1	2	5	24.0	51	62
Ceredigion	70	179,169	0.3	7	5,001	714	1	5	1	16.7	57	72
Merthyr Tydfil	58	11,076	5.2	5	4,737	947	5	5	0	13.1	39	48

Another element of LEA provision is the upkeep of school buildings. Most of the survey schools had pre-1900 buldings but some, with post-1945 buildings, found these to be the most troublesome and expensive to maintain.

Variations in LEA policies in the past are also relevant. The most significant is in Gwynedd, with its small 11–16 schools in Meirionydd and Dwyfor created to facilitate the establishment of a sixth-form college for the two districts, on two sites; whereas Pembrokeshire, on the other hand, concentrates pupils in large, mainly urban schools, with the exception of the two schools in the northernmost rural part of the county, both of which appear in this study. Generally, however, all the LEAs interviewed stated that the small secondary schools were given favourable consideration as regards funding, which was weighted according to school size (for example, one school was described as having an additional £500 per pupil in its budget, compared to other schools in the same LEA).

The main component of the LEAs' expenditure, however, is staffing, to levels that enable full delivery of the National Curriculum requirements. However, some of the LEAs expressed concerns about: a) the availability of suitable staff for management team appointments; and b) the recruitment of Welsh-medium teachers in some subjects and of staff generally in the sciences and mathematics. There was a general consensus, however, that staff recruitment was difficult in most subject specialisms in rural areas.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this article three questions were outlined, namely:

1) How do schools respond to their rurality and size?
2) What do schools perceive to be the distinctive features of small rural secondary schools?
3) How do LEAs support small rural schools so as to maximize the perceived benefits?

In response to question 1, it can be said that small schools in rural Wales respond positively to their situation, despite the fact that rurality points to low population densities, which are reflected in the size and nature of individual school populations. The school management teams are therefore flexible in their approach to both curriculum provision and staffing, as exemplified by several of the schools in the study.

This means providing courses for which there is a perceived or actual demand, either in the school or in a nearby college, in the pupil's preferred language. As regards staffing, schools and teachers may have to think of new models of employment in rural areas, such as mobile subject-teachers, or make far greater use of new technologies, such as video-conferencing, for sixth-form studies. Such developments would also be seen to contribute, in rural areas, to the Welsh Assembly's aim of creating a Learning Country where lifelong learning is feasible in rural areas as well as in urban areas. Indeed, one of the survey schools (E2) is already moving into this field, by building on its existing school and/or community facilities.

Question 2: as regards the distinctive features of the small rural secondary school, these are probably perceived rather than concrete. Schools point to their close-knit communities and their strong connunity links, with the school responding to parents' demands, particularly as regards language of instruction and catering for the local, bilingual jobs market, and providing a high level of support, in some schools, for pupils with special educational needs alongside the mainstream provision.

Question 3: the Local Education Authorities involved in this study support small rural secondary schools within their boundaries, bearing the main burden of rurality. They provide financial support to cover transport costs, some higher staffing costs and some of the expense of surplus spaces. Several authorities interviewed gave as an example the tendering process for some services, stating that they did not function properly in rural areas due to a lack of competition, for example for pupil transport contracts. One authority estimated that this service was 10 per cent more expensive in their area than in more urban parts of Wales.

Changes do seem to be on the horizon, however, as outlined at the ELWa conference in Aberystwyth on February 20 2002, where emphasis was placed on improving the qualifications of school-leavers by expanding the choices available to them, the concept of lifelong learning and the role of schools in that process. Indeed, one of the survey schools (E1) gave a presentation at the conference, indicating its vision for the future.

The future, however, is still unclear, as schools await expected changes in the funding of post-16 pupils and the possible effects of these changes on the remainder of the secondary education sector in Wales.

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