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urban village schools

Putting relationships at the heart of
secondary school organisation and design
James Wetz

SUMMARY

IN URBAN VILLAGE SCHOOLS JAMES WETZ

- Outlines the principle features of a new model for secondary schools that puts relationships at its heart – with a roll of 375 pupils and where staff teach no more than 75 pupils
- Draws on international ideas of human scale education, the psychological and developmental factors that promote learning, and the voices of disaffected young people in developing this model
- Includes sample plans and visualisations from award-winning architects, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios

URBAN VILLAGE SCHOOLS

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The Government's multibillion pound Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity for school refurbishment and renewal, but are we simply re-housing old problems in new buildings? The 'Urban Village School' is a new model proposed by former headteacher Jame Wetz for our inner city communities. Developing ideas from his Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme, 'The Children Left Behind' (2008), Wetz challenges the existing orthodoxy of large schools and Academies and asks: how can we organise our secondary schools so that all young people are encouraged to learn and gain a stake in society?

KEY POINTS

- Building large 'off-the-peg' schools through the Government's BSF programme will not address the real needs of all young people.
- Young people need secure, supportive environments and meaningful relationships with teachers and peers in order to be able to learn. These conditions are hard to achieve in large secondary schools.
- The Urban Village School offers a human scale and cost-effective alternative to large comprehensives. Several schools could link together to benefit from economies of scale.
- Urban Village schooling has radical implications for the teaching profession in terms of training, pedagogy, role and promotional structure.

THE CONTEXT: THE CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG PEOPLE, TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

Despite our best efforts, there is a widening gap between those who are achieving in our schools and those who are not. Over 35,000 young people leave school each year with no GCSE qualifications, little chance of employment, and no stake in society. And there is rising concern for the health and wellbeing of teachers in secondary education.

A 'crisis of childhood' in the UK

Increasingly young people are seen as a threat to be controlled through regulation rather than nurtured through relationships. In 2007, the UNICEF report on child poverty described UK children as some of the least nurtured in the developed world. Our society is 'very unequal, with high levels of poverty' and such inequality impacts on wellbeing and educational attainment. The UK has a high number of school exclusions and an unprecedented rise in the numbers of young people entering the youth justice system, although adult crime rates have been falling.

Secondary schools fail young people with complex needs

In 2006 James Wetz's report, *Holding Children in Mind over Time*, revealed that 40% of the young people in Bristol leaving school in 2004 without any GCSE qualifications had achieved average or above results in English, maths or science at primary school. These were young people who had had to manage complex emotional and social changes in their lives. Although they had succeeded at primary school, the organisation and design of their secondary schools had failed to support their needs.

The Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme

This nationwide programme will transform most secondary schools in England over the next 15 years. Although its aims go beyond building renewal to support more fundamental educational reform, no clear link has been made between school organisation and design, and addressing the needs of all young people.

DEVELOPING PRINCIPLES FOR SCHOOL ORGANISATION AND DESIGN: THREE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- **The experiences of disengaged young people** whose success at primary school contrasts sharply with their failure at secondary school.

- **The evidence from Human scale practice abroad**, outlining the successes demonstrated by the small school movement in the USA and the Danish system of Folkeskoles.

- **The psychological factors that make for a successful childhood** – children need a reliable 'attachment figure' and a 'secure base in relationships' in order to be able to trust, regulate emotions and be open to learning.



THE URBAN VILLAGE SCHOOL

This new model of schooling for our inner cities is based on principles derived from these sources of information; award-winning architects Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios provide plans and visualisations for its design, taking into account government guidelines for school buildings (BB98).

The Urban Village School is a co-educational, non-selective, learning and research community of 375 11–16 year olds, designed and organised so that young people have a secure base in relationships, are well-known by their teachers and peers, and challenged to fulfil their potential. Underpinning the school is a theoretical framework based in attachment theory.

The building

- The School has a three-form entry, with 75 pupils per year organised into three Halls: the Foundation Hall (Years 7 and 8), the Senior Hall (Years 9 and 10), and the Graduation Hall (Year 11).
- Each Hall is a distinct learning community with its own wing and facilities, including the Chapter House (03), the performance, social, dining and meeting space for the Hall community.
- Pupils are mostly taught in their Hall class bases (08) and work studios (06, 07) by a small number of staff. Each class base has access to an internal courtyard (04) and external learning gardens (10).
- Attached to each class base is a pupil support room (09) for small group work and for consultation with attachment workers, who support pupils individually and through the all age advisory groups (which serve to integrate pupils across the Halls).
- Each Hall has an administrative office (20), which supports staff, pupils and families and provides a communication centre dealing with lateness, illness, absence and family contact as an integral part of the Hall community's function.
- At the heart of the school are the Community Meeting Room (01), a large meeting and performance space essential for the Community Programme, and the Research Centre (02).

Timetable and learning

- There are six six-week terms per year, with a two-week break between and four weeks in the summer. The school day is from 10 am to 6 pm (taking account of recent research into adolescent biorhythms).
- The timetable is flexible, organised around Learning, Assessment and Community Programmes, and the teaching cross-curricular.
- The Learning Programme (allocated three days a week) emphasises active enquiry and in-depth learning and is delivered through research assignments.

- The Assessment Programme (one day a week) is structured through group reviews, performance assessment and narrative reporting. All “homework” is schoolwork done in school time with the support of teachers.
- The Community Programme is delivered by the attachment workers and the school’s two Co-Directors (Headteachers). Pupils working in groups drawn from across the three Halls participate in whole school activities which foster a sense of community within the school and with the local and wider communities.

Training, development and research

- A high profile is given to staff training and development. 20 per cent of staff time (a day a week) is dedicated to this, to supervision, and to collaborative consultation and reflection.
- The central position of the Research Centre emphasises the importance of learning and research as the school’s primary task and of its role as a research community linked to academic partners and training providers, building new knowledge about the way education is offered and accessed.

CONCLUSION: A NEW COMMITMENT TO YOUNG PEOPLE

We have to be passionate about the way we educate all our children and in particular the disaffected and difficult to engage young. If we are to be successful we must turn this passion into commitments. These commitments are challenging and lie at the heart of the concept of Urban Village Schools as Learning and Research Communities.

- **We will offer all young people an experience of schooling with which they can engage fully and achieve their academic potential.**
- **Young people will have a positive experience of living in a community that they will be able to take into their adult lives.**
- **Young people will have an experience of schooling on which they can look back with pride and affection.**
- **Their experience of school will ensure that they have a positive role and a stake in our society.**

FURTHER INFORMATION

Urban Village Schools: Putting relationships at the heart of secondary school organisation and design by James Wetz is published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

The book and summary can be downloaded free from www.gulbenkian.org.uk. Copies of the book (£8.50 + p&p) can be ordered from www.centralbooks.co.uk or www.amazon.co.uk. ISBN 978 1 903080 11 5

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