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Essay

Britain's Smallest Rural School

The British are an essentially pragmatic people, as their long history shows. Nothing demonstrates this to better advantage than their relationship with the small village school over the last fifty years.

At the close of World War II, money from the Central Government and the Local Education Authorities (LEA) was made available for extensive rebuilding programmes. Many small schools, both urban and rural, received a much needed "face-lift." Some were closed and replaced by new buildings, invariably larger and modern in design. But in the last decade, there has been a change of attitude. The present Conservative Government has placed a moratorium upon any further closures of small rural schools. Sustained pressure from parents has had much to do with this. Even schools with decreasing enrolments have stayed open. Such a one is Corsock in Scotland, with only seven students on roll. Scoraig has a primary and a secondary school for its sixteen families. Isolation of the communities in both cases has been a determining factor.

But the cynosure of all eyes must surely be Bwlychsarnau in mid-Wales, with only two students on roll, and one full-time teacher.

How efficient can such a school be? Well, like Rikki-tikki-tavi (in *The Jungle Book*), the best, indeed the only, way to answer this question was to "run and find out." Accordingly, after all the necessary prerequisite facilitating permissions had been obtained, the school was visited on 22 November 1989.

Many Canadian teachers who once taught in small rural schools, and diminishing numbers who still do so, may find this report of interest.

Bwlchysarnau County Primary School

This small rural school is situated in the rolling uplands of mid-Wales in an essentially sheep-farming countryside. Last year it had 15 children on roll. This year, however, numbers have fallen to two, a girl aged 10 and a boy aged 8. Last year the school was staffed by one teacher and a part-time teacher. This year, there is just one full-time teacher. The school was built originally in 1870, under the aegis of the local Baptist Church. The Chapel and its graveyard adjoin the school. In the course of time, the school came under Radnorshire Education Authority, now subsumed into Powys.

Facilities

The building has two classrooms. Neither of them has central heating; but efficient wall-heaters have been installed. Indoor washroom facilities are simple, but very clean and well-maintained. The playground is paved, and is big enough for a small net-ball court. It provides opportunities for physical exercise on fine days.

The school is unusually well-equipped. A great many fiction and reference books are on display, supplied on a rotating basis by the County Mobile Library Service. There is a television set, complete with VCR; also a computer; and a (vintage) piano. An electric kettle enables the teacher and students to have a hot drink with their mid-day meal.

The school curriculum

The day begins with a reverent informal act of worship, after which the two pupils turn to their subject work in English and arithmetic. Each works on an individual basis. Both seem well-adjusted to working on their own. Direct instruction is given by the teacher when necessary. In addition to the familiar workbooks, some computer programmes in several subject areas are also available. Art includes painting (often still-life) and charcoal-drawing. On the day of the visit, handicraft took the form of joint work by both students on a miniature suspension bridge, using balsa wood and string. Expression work is encouraged by the teacher in many ways. Several imaginative poems by the older pupil were displayed on the walls. Both pupils maintain a daily record at their weather station, which includes daily wind changes on a simplified Beaufort Scale. Only recently, the school has been awarded two prizes for entries in competitions outside, one being a scroll for excellence in art and design, and one an attractive wooden heraldic shield from the prestigious Welsh Agricultural Society. These are remarkable achievements for so small a school.

The teacher has put up on the display board an outline of the term's work to be followed. It includes a statement of aims and various assignments. Her success in past years is well-reflected in the record of work she has kept. It includes photographs taken by herself of many out-of-school activities, with appropriate questions underneath for the children to answer on their return to school. Several parents accompanied the students on these visits. At Christmas last year, the children presented a pageant which they themselves scripted, cast, acted – and thereafter reviewed, in a very shrewd fashion! The play was performed in the adjoining Chapel before a large congregation. This term, the two pupils have made collections of local barks (of trees), leaves, fruits, flowers, and miscellaneous artifacts of wood. During the lunch break on the day of the visit, they built a model farm and talked readily about this and their other activities, which also included simple weaving. The teacher sits with them and talks with them over the noon meal which comes promptly at mid-day in hot containers from the local canteen. It is nutritious, well-prepared, offers a balanced diet, and even provides for a choice of menu. Alternatively, the children can bring their own sandwiches and a beverage if they so prefer.

The teacher

The teacher is fully attuned to the ethos of small village schools. She understands the needs and wishes of her pupils. She shares in their love of the countryside and is very knowledgeable about it. Two of her own interests are bee-keeping and growing trees: both are reflected in one way or another in the children's own expression work. She fully appreciates the value for rural children of an "integrated day" approach. She plays the piano, and the children sing songs together. She has enlisted the help on occasion of the Welsh Cultural Heritage Society and speaks highly of it. Tuition in Welsh (now compulsory in schools in Wales) is provided by a peripatetic specialist for one period a week. This is not enough; and the teacher herself would like to have more.

Conclusion

Powys LEA is to be congratulated on so liberal a provision of facilities and equipment for this very small rural school. The generous staffing ratio speaks for itself, being well below existing ratios elsewhere in small schools in the Authority's catchment area.

The future of this school remains uncertain. Closure notices are already posted on the door. It is understood that a dozen attempts have been made in recent years to close the school and transfer the pupils elsewhere.

That it still remains open is due to the pertinacity of the parents of children still there, in particular; to continuing support from the local community, in general; and to on-going respect for local feelings by the LEA.

One thing is very certain. The two students presently in this school are receiving an enriched education admirably suited to their ages, aptitudes, and abilities. They, and therefore their parents too, must count themselves most fortunate.

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