

Inspection: The Rural Perspective

John Roberts, the very effective Head of Bewcastle School, writes of a recent Ofsted visit:



There are beauties and difficulties about working in a small rural school. On the plus side you can get free range eggs and local honey delivered to you on a regular basis, on the down side you can get stuck in a snow drift with a burst boiler and frozen breath with no help on the horizon- which is being blasted by blizzards. Isolation can bring joy in bucket loads but also limit the range of experiences you can plan for children. The first trick is to tip the balance towards the sunny side of the fell and meander with the children in the important years of discovery. Children appreciate this...one young man, now age 16, was asked about his primary school (ours) and he replied with

a farming analogy... *"Well you know you have battery chickens and free range chickens. At Bewcastle, we were all free range."* That statement sums us up better than any Ofsted category.

The second trick is how to convince the inspectors that we are doing something worthwhile!

Small rural schools are the living antithesis to the 'one size fits all' formula. We don't normally have deputy heads, subject co-ordinators, caretakers or bursars. At Bewcastle we have 37 children, two classes, two full time teachers, one full time TA and one teacher, part time, giving me the opportunity to read demands from the Cumbria finance department, cheerful letters from the DFE and decide when we should empty the septic tank.

Our staff meetings happen over coffee with Hobnobs at irregular intervals, our professional development comes in spasm, and PPA time is still a 'nice idea'. And yet....we love everything about our school, our children are always at the centre of everything we do, they appreciate this and the families wouldn't want anything else.

Being a teaching head can mean teaching for 0.7 of the timetable. Inspectors ask how is it possible to monitor teaching and learning in the other class? I reply, usually in a quiet voice, *"Not that difficult really."* Clare and I team teach at times, swap classes at times, plan together, examine work together, alter things together and, if we think this may not be right, Jane (0.5) lets us know and throws in other ideas. The four of us (including Alison our TA) discuss children's progress and difficulties, the need for change, for new resources, for CPD, for a new coat of paint and the quality of the lasagne cooked by our own cook who is also the secretary. *We live and breathe as a family* and know when one of us is feeling unwell, knackered or hyper. We cover each other and check on each other. *We just know* what each of us is doing

Lack of expertise in a small school can hinder breadth say inspectors. We know. So we buy in a dance tutor who is brilliant, a music teacher who is exceptional and we learn how to do the rest including making wooden frames on our woodwork bench, teaching breast-stroke in our heated outdoor pool (constructed and maintained by the

community) and involve the children in projects of their own choosing, getting them to do presentations on the skills of skateboarding, grooming ponies, building quad bikes, training collies, feeding lambs, finding fossils by the river and growing parsnips to eat for school dinner.

Small cohorts can make the statistics of attainment look like the Sorbonne, especially when you have only one child in year 6 who gets level 5 in everything, but it can also look like the most deprived inner city school if that child has learning difficulties. So, how do we overcome this? Our average year 6 cohort for the last 5 years has been 5. It is nonsense to attempt any statistical analysis with that, so I tracked back 5 years, analysed attainment and achievement and gave inspectors the results. 25 children is still a small figure but 80% achieved level 4+ in English and 88% made 2 levels of progress; 88% achieved level 4+ in maths and 84% made two levels of progress. Overall 76% made level 4+ in both English and maths.

Giving inspectors information in this way is both informative and helpful. It also allows you to talk about Jemma who got a level 4 in writing but should have got a 5 but was distraught because her dog ran away that morning, or Billy, who came despite a chest infection and battled through a high temperature to miss level 4 in maths by just 2 marks. Therein lies the strength of a small school.....we know the children very well. Honesty and understanding between teacher and child underpins the learning process. We teach each child for at least 3 years, we monitor them very closely, and in no rush to charge on at the end of the year because we know we can pick them up in September. We allow them to grow, encourage their strengths and guide them through their weaknesses. No child can ever be anonymous! No child can hide, kid, cheat, pretend.

Safeguarding proved problematic. At the time safeguarding created huge problems with checklists resembling those of Mission Control during the Apollo moon landings. One of our two inspectors did '*safeguarding*.' The school sits at the end of a cul-de-sac that slides quietly away from an empty B road in the northern-most part of Cumbria. We are deemed 'remote'. No traffic passes. On our road you are either going to the farm or one of two cottages (one belongs to Jim former Head for 22 years, the other to Liz, our cleaner), or the school itself. We have one regular visitor, Jack the Post, who arrives early, pops in for a cuppa and some chocolate Hobnobs and talks of the stress he's under. We sympathise. Occasional visitors come in for like refreshment. It's peaceful.

She had her checklist to go through with me at 8.00am sharp. Walking to the back of the school towards Jean's farm she stopped at the top fence and said, "*If this were an inner city school I would close it right now. This fence is too small.*" I said, "*Ah...but it isn't an inner city school. Anyway, how are the children in danger here? Do you imagine the sheep to spring over the fence and mug the children? Perhaps a herd of roe deer might limbo underneath the bottom wire and commandeer the nursery scooters and terrorise the toddlers.*" I chuckled. Then I stopped. She stared at me, the kind you would normally reserve for when a large man with a ginger beard and dressed as a midwife might speak to you in Serbo Croat while you rummage through the cardigans in Marks and Spencer's. She blinked slowly five times and then said, "*Lock the gate!*"

"What gate?"

"The gate at the front of the school."

I said, "*The gate at the front of the school is a small wooden gate with a small latch. How shall I lock it?*"

"With a bike lock," she replied.

"I haven't got a bike lock."

"Get a bike lock and lock it by 11am."

"Why 11am?"

"Because I am inspecting the gate at 11am."

She walked away.

I walked towards Jack. He was on his third Hobnob and reading the 'Cumberland News.' I explained the problem and asked his help. He nodded. By 10.30, he returned with a rusty bike lock, seemingly Penny Farthing vintage. I thanked him and told him there were scones in the kitchen. Being a teacher believing in creative thinking I asked the children to sort it. Three boys took it, wrapped it around it in such a way it looked like a bike lock wrapped around a gate. The boys looked at the lock, then at me, then at the lock again. I was running out of time. *"There's a hot chocolate involved."* By 10.45 it was finished. At 11a.m. sharp, the safeguarding inspector walked towards the gate, saw the lock and ticked the box for gates locked with a bike lock.

We do understand safeguarding and rigour in documentation, and appropriate training but that is all they are. At Bewcastle we have 37 children and at least four adults, usually five. We don't disappear to a staff room at break times- we have no staff room- we eat with the children and supervise them as they play on the back field. If a small child falls over, older children rush to take them inside and look after them. All documents and courses are up to date. Before 'safeguarding' became national headlines we behaved just as we do now. Older ones, including us, play with and watch out for younger ones and look after each other.

Governors have always been very supportive, but not heavily involved. From the start the Chair told me, *"John, we don't expect you to tell us how to farm, so we won't tell you how to run a school."* Most would be too busy lambing, milking, calving, feeding and hay making, leaving little time for school matters but they would want to know what we had been doing and support in any way. Our lead inspector wanted more. I suspect that influenced our grade, despite 'outstanding' community relationships. Our inspection report has not one negative sentence and we are happy with it. No complaints. We are proud of our children. It is great to see them grow, become independent, leave and return for a play, music groups, work experience or a swim with their friends. We will continue to keep to the sunny side of the fell safe in the knowledge that free range chickens will always lay tastier eggs.