Urban Village Schools as Learning and Research Communities

A new approach to schooling for all young people in our inner cities

Summary

Report commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to be published in June 2008
A report proposing an alternative approach to the design and organisation of inner city schools commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in association Bristol University, Graduate School of Education
The report ‘Holding Children in Mind over Time’ published in March 2006, explored the degree to which the current design and organisation of secondary schools limits their capacity to meet the educational and emotional needs of young people, who are leaving our schools with no GCSE qualifications.

Based on this report the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation provided a grant to conduct a feasibility study into the design, organisation and cost implications of a small state secondary school, based on the model adopted by the Boston Pilot Schools that might serve as an exemplar for mainstream education.

This report titled ‘Urban Village Schools as Learning and Research Communities’ draws on intelligence from the voices of disaffected young people who were unable to engage successfully in our current offer of schooling, from the factors that make for a successful childhood, from international human scale school design, and from educational practice in therapeutic communities. Using design principles drawn from this intelligence, a potential model of an Urban Village School as a Learning and Research Community is described and costed, along with an architect’s view of what such a model would look like.

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Summary

With up to 30,000 young people leaving our secondary schools each year with few if any qualifications, and despite the very best efforts of many schools to address their needs, this report asks, have we got the design and organisation of our secondary schools right?

Chapter 1 of the report gives an overview of the challenges facing young people and our schools and reviews the data on the young people who have become disengaged and disaffected. It asks whether there is a ‘crisis of childhood and adolescence’ fuelled by adult anxiety about the young. It touches upon the implications for the Youth Justice system of the numbers of young people leaving school with no qualifications, and reviews recent research in relation to low educational attainment in our inner city communities. It highlights the widening gap between those achieving in our schools and the growing disaffection and anger and alienation of a significant and increasing underclass of young people who do not achieve within our schooling system as it is currently designed and organised. It questions whether many of the disaffected and difficult to educate young may well be those who have lacked affection and for whom the impact of a less than secure attachment affects their resilience to manage the complex settings in our inner city secondary schools. It asks how we might begin to design and organise our schools and so create settings where all our young people can engage in learning, and become young adults who on leaving school have a stake in civil society.

The report identifies four sources of intelligence, themes that might inform a new model of schooling in our inner city communities – Urban Village Schools as Learning and Research Communities. The four themes described in the report are: the narratives of family and school experience of young people who have left our inner city secondary schools with no qualifications at all; the knowledge we have about the factors that make for successful childhood; new approaches to human scale school design and organisation to be found in international practice; and what we can learn from the design and organisation of educational practice in therapeutic communities. These themes form the discussion of the next 4 chapters, and draw out from the discussion key design principles that might be support new thinking about school organisation.

Chapter 2 takes up the first of these themes and shares the co-edited stories of five young people who left secondary schools in Bristol at the age of 16 without a single
GCSE qualification between them. They were representative of 10% (300 young people) of their year cohort leaving Bristol's mainstream secondary schools without qualifications. Harry, Kirsten, Devlin, Jackie and Julia describe and reflect upon their difficult family and school experiences. Their stories are all the more difficult to hear, and also to ignore, when we find that these young people actually left their primary schools in the city with average or above average results in English, Mathematics or Science. They are young people who should have made progress at Key Stage 3, achieved at least 5 reasonable GCSEs and should have been capable of Post 16 courses and potentially Higher Education.

Around 40% of the young people in the Bristol study who left secondary school with no qualifications achieved Level 4 or above in key subjects at the end of their primary schooling.

Chapter 3 explores and seeks to apply what we know about securing a successful, or ‘good enough’ childhood, to school design. It focuses on four questions. What would our schools look like if there were to provide a consistent and reliable setting for all young people, and were based on an understanding that young people learn in and through relationships? What would our schools look like if we adopted and made explicit theoretical frameworks to inform practice? What would our schools look like if we were to recognise the impact of neglect and abuse on children and their ability to engage in learning, and resourced our teachers to attend to this? Finally the Chapter considers what our schools might look like if we moved from having to exclude children who cannot cope with the complex demands of our current offer of secondary schooling, to the design and organisation of schools which might enable young people to be supported to engage positively in their learning.

Chapter 4 is based on field visits to Boston (USA) and Denmark, and searches for new learning about school design and organisation from international practice which has a strong bias to human scale settings. It explores the lessons to be learned from the Boston Pilot School movement and discusses the ideas and practice of two key American educationalists, Debbie Meier and Tony Wagner; and finally it looks at the lessons to be learned from Denmark’s educational provision.

Chapter 5 focuses on the theme that might provide new intelligence with which we might reconsider secondary school design and looks at the educational theory and practice that informs therapeutic communities which work with some of our most troubled and
distressed young people.

Chapter 6 takes the design principles from each of these four themes to inform the presentation of a potential model of an Urban Village School as a Learning and Research Community. This potential model, exemplar school design and organisation is fully described in this section of the report. It sets out ten key features of the exemplar model of an Urban Village that are at the heart of its design and organisation.

Chapter 7 looks at the financial case of the Urban Village School to demonstrate that pound for pound it would be no more expensive that existing schools, but also that it would provide very considerable social savings further down the line if more and more young people are able to leave school with a sense of achievement, with a sense of affection for their schooling experience, and with a sense of community, which will enable them to play positive part in civil society.

Chapter 8 gives an architect’s view of how the intelligence that informs the design of the Urban Village School as a Learning and Research Community might be visualised in spatial terms.