

1 The Educational Context

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A Commonwealth Secretariat survey of education in a sample of small states, conducted in preparation for the Eighth Commonwealth Education Conference (Sri Lanka 1980), and the monograph *Scale, Isolation and Dependence: Education in the Small States of the Commonwealth* (Commonwealth Secretariat 1984) both identified the factors of scale, isolation and dependence as being of critical significance to educational development and prospects in small countries. In this chapter, Colin Brock, the author of the monograph, considers the same three concepts in order to provide the educational context for the studies which follow.

The question of scale

Of the three main characteristics under discussion here, scale is most directly tied to the notion of smallness. Smallness of national scale is clearly a relative concept, and may be measured in terms of land area, population or gross national product. The relationship between each of the three indices, in respect of any one small country, provides the context of scale for that state. In any particular case, one or two of the indices may not be considered to be small. For example, there are small wealthy countries, or countries with large land areas but small populations. So, while scale is certainly a significant factor in the context of educational provision, it is difficult to generalise since the

relationship between geographic, demographic and economic dimensions will be peculiar to each state, providing a unique context for its educational provision. Of course, all states are unique, but one of the outcomes of smallness seems to be to place the idiosyncrasy of the state at the centre of the stage. There may be fewer policy options and the margin for error is less generous than for larger states.

Extent of educational provision

There is no reason why the extent of educational provision itself should not be one of the indices of scale. Whereas the three indices already mentioned operate on a continuous gradient – that is to say there is always some land, some people and some money involved – formal education provision may be completely lacking at certain levels as the overall scale of a country diminishes. For example, there comes a point at which the provision of a higher education sector becomes problematic, then a further education sector, and even a secondary sector in some cases. This perception of smallness is already well developed within multi-island states in respect of the ceiling of educational provision in different island communities and consequent related problems of migration.

Educational problems

Some of the educational problems experienced by small states are similar to those of larger nations but ‘writ large’. This is to say, they are more extreme versions of the same problems. For example, in all countries there is a problem of matching the output of the education system with the manpower needs of the economy. In large, diversified national economies with substantial and ongoing structural change, selecting and targeting a particular occupation is becoming increasingly difficult. A curriculum broadly based in knowledge and skills is desirable. In a small concentrated economy it is obviously not suitable to focus the school curriculum towards just one or two areas of occupation. Small concentrated economies are also ‘open’ and at the mercy of major trading power structures. For both reasons a broadly based curriculum is desirable. However, unless migration to

other work opportunities is available, the direct application of diffuse skills is problematic in the small national context.

Another problem shared by both small and large states, but more acutely felt in the former is that of professional promotion, especially within the teaching service. The functionally more specific training operating in large states may be limiting. In a large economy that is in recession, or at best stagnant, whole generations of teachers may find promotion denied to them. In a small economy, however buoyant at any given time, the question of promotion is always a problem because of the very few senior posts there are in the system anyway. This is one of the factors leading to a 'brain drain' from smaller states to larger ones.

The problem of selection is universal. At some stage there has to be selection, but the larger and more affluent the system, the longer it can be delayed, with obvious benefit to the adjustment of educational output to meet demand as well as to the personal development of the individual.

Small nation states have the problem of servicing a dual economy comprising a highly localised and concentrated sector and an international sector requiring diffuse skills as well as those of advanced information technology. Smallness of scale acts against the provision of such skills for all, especially in developing countries, and for the maintenance of selection. With selection comes the influence of personalised politics and patronage, with the elite of a small country often utilising external private schooling which may lead to a weakening, even neglect, of the state system of schools.

One very difficult problem for small states to overcome is the higher unit costs they incur in providing most forms of education. If curricula comparable to those of larger states are to be resourced and staffed then this is bound to be proportionately more expensive. The alternative is to provide a less specialist teaching force and a more integrated curriculum, which implies a more generalist training. While this may be desirable in respect of increased localisation, it may be damaging to the international dimension that has to be addressed in a nation state, whereas a small or peripheral component of a large

state does not have to cope with this dimension.

In addition to problems that are more acute versions of those of larger states, there are also those that are more specific to small states. Firstly, smallness of national population beyond a certain point - and depending on the affluence of any particular case - will prevent the provision and operation of a complete education system. That is to say certain specialisms or even entire sectors may be ruled out. In general, the smaller the state the greater the problem in this respect, leading to various forms of dependency.

Secondly, the small scale of a system will require multiple roles and duties on the part of its administrators. For example, a permanent secretary in a small state may have responsibility for health, welfare and wider aspects of culture, as well as for the day-to-day administration of formal schooling. The educational and training model experienced by such administrators in their own development is often too specialised and bureaucratic, having been derived from larger systems.

Similarly teachers in small country systems, like their administrators, often have to cope with multigrade and multidisciplinary duties. The training they have had, often outside of their own national context, has often been too specialised and based on resources that are either lacking or inappropriate in the small country context.

For both administrators and teachers in all countries, opportunities for release from routine duties in order to reflect on their work and acquire new skills are vital, not only for personal development but also for staff development in general. The smaller the country, in terms both of economy and demography, the more difficult it is for staff to be released. In many cases there may be only one person looking after a key specialism, in which case release may require buying in a replacement. This not only doubles the cost but runs the risk of further external influence that may be inappropriate.

In the same way that individuals in small states need to be flexible and polyvalent, so too do the institutions, but they have not normally been established in any radical or diversified form. The task

of reforming and perhaps combining previously independent units of the system may not only be disproportionately costly to achieve (though not necessarily to operate), but also may incur professional disfavour in that fewer senior positions may result from such rationalisation.

The smaller the state, the less likelihood of the economic and technical capacity for producing new, more locally relevant, curriculum materials at any level. Yet any curricular reform aimed at greater localisation of the curriculum - generally regarded as desirable - will not be sustained without such support in the way of new materials. It is, of course, possible to produce teaching materials with very simple technology, but in order for them to be acceptable and therefore effective, it is often necessary to overcome the tendency to reject materials that are not up to commercially published standards in terms of paper quality and multicoloured illustrations. It is difficult to interest commercial publishing houses in the very small print runs that are involved in the servicing of such systems.

Some educational advantages

Smallness of national scale, especially if combined with territorial compactness and some degree of economic diversification, can confer distinct advantages over larger states, and especially over small or peripheral components of such states.

Firstly, the political status of national independence - at any rate in respect of controlling and operating the education system - produces a situation of close proximity as between those administering the system, those teaching in it, and those who are clients of it. Accessibility of all parties to each other makes for a recognition of various needs and points of view even if these are not necessarily acted upon. The dead hand of a large bureaucracy is less heavily imposed in a situation where a class teacher may well meet the minister of education through casual contact in the community.

Secondly, once a decision has been made, for example in respect of a curriculum reform with associated in-service training for teachers, the speed with which it can be implemented across the

whole system is potentially much greater than in a large state. Such a situation should engender an ambience of popular participation by teachers and clients alike in the development of education.

Given the need for a greater localisation of curriculum in small states, that is to say a closer correspondence between the content of courses and texts and the realities of the physical, social, cultural and economic context of any particular country, it should be possible for teachers and students to operate as the research base for accumulating local information and formulating materials for teaching about it.

It must, of course, be recognised that not all small states are sufficiently compact to enjoy advantages such as are described above, and this problem leads directly to the next issue.

The question of isolation

Like scale, isolation is not only a relative concept, but also applies itself in a number of different forms.

Spatial isolation and educational provision

Sheer distance and genuine remoteness come first to mind with respect to isolation. This form of isolation may operate in terms of distance from other countries or even distance between components of one country. The latter would normally be perceived as referring to islands, but could equally well apply to isolated communities within a continental territory such as Botswana, where the combination of smallness of population and vastness of land area occurs. The implications of logistics and costs for educational provision are obvious, to say nothing of cultural isolation and the effects of migration from periphery to core. This type of isolation, combined with smallness of scale, has engendered co-operation between clusters of small states in the field of education, including the establishment of shared universities - the University of the West Indies and the University of the South Pacific.

Remoteness does not necessarily involve vast distances. Internal difficulties of communication, even within small compact states,

can render some communities relatively isolated and when compounded with the isolation of the nation in a wider sphere can be doubly disadvantageous. Indeed the initial remoteness may render internal isolation more difficult to overcome. In consequence, progress through the sectors of education may be severely inhibited.

Another form of spatial isolation is that of aerial constraint or insularity, most obviously affecting geographic islands, but also small states that are political enclaves. In both cases possibilities for cross-border interaction are constrained and probably more costly in comparison with normal land boundaries between larger states.

Given the relative nature of isolation, small states are obviously affected differentially. For example, whereas the small island archipelago state may normally be expected to be in a difficult position, proximity to a larger neighbour may overcome the problem, if relations between the two are suitably co-operative. For example, the symbiotic relationship between the British and American Virgin Islands and the relative proximity of both to the mainland USA largely overcomes the isolation of insularity in respect of education. By contrast the relative isolation of Seychelles or the Maldives in the Indian Ocean confers no such benefits.

The location of a small state in relation to networks of transport and communication may well offset apparent physical remoteness. If a small state happens to be included in such a network, or better still is a nodal point, such as Barbados, Cyprus or Fiji, this can have considerable benefits for education. Not only will such a focus be in regular touch with larger nations and their educational developments, it will also be more likely to become the centre for private or post-compulsory provision within a group of small states. Modernisation of transport, and especially the development of air travel has, paradoxically, worked towards a greater degree of insularity in some small island regions.

Implications of political isolation

This is not only a question of political geography, but also of political status. The strong association throughout the world between formal

education systems and the national spatial parameter is particularly inappropriate for small states whose concerns have increasingly to be with very local and global contexts at the same time. Educational provision is a political tool in all countries, and the obverse of public accessibility mentioned above is that of a tendency towards personalised and individualised politics. This may have implications for the patronage of the very few opportunities that may exist for the professional development of teachers. The intensity of political rivalry that may exist within small political units can severely constrain the steady development of educational provision.

Some small states find themselves in the position of being political enclaves, for example Lesotho, Belize, The Gambia, Malta and Gibraltar, relatively isolated from other Commonwealth states and having to deal with larger surrounding or adjoining neighbours. This can have implications for education, especially in the field of languages, given that relations with neighbouring states are inevitable. Hence the significance of Spanish in Gibraltar and Belize, of Arabic and Italian in Malta, and French in The Gambia.

Effects of social and cultural isolation

Small, relatively isolated states, and especially islands, tend to be particularly idiosyncratic socially and culturally as has already been noted. Here again language is an indicator, with obvious implications for formal education. As an extreme case, Vanuatu is thought to have scores of linguistic systems within a population of about 120,000. The language of Malta is unique and therefore, although central to the culture, requires the acquisition of other languages for commercial and political intercourse.

The particularity of the economic, political and social history of each and every small Commonwealth state, and especially those that are islands, has in each case engendered a unique 'island culture' within which formal education operates and by which it is moulded. At one and the same time, this is the strength of local culture and identity, but also potentially problematic in terms of educational co-operation with other small states within a small country cluster.

Tensions between local needs and regional facilities are often exhibited, though they may be overcome in respect of regional co-operation in curriculum development.

One cultural feature found in many small states of the Commonwealth, and with which education has much to do, is that of a migration mentality. Given the limited local opportunities and the wider opportunities for migration that existed during the formative period of educational provision in such states, it was an inevitable consequence that schooling was seen and operated as a vehicle for emigration to professional occupations in the metropolises or regional centres. This fitted well the highly selective and academic model of schooling bequeathed to small states as part of the colonial legacy. Although opportunities for migration still exist in some places, the dominant role of schooling as a vehicle for emigration is no longer appropriate in a situation where, as has already been noted, local imperatives are not to the fore. The adjustment of this received model of schooling to a different cultural context is one of the major challenges facing small states.

The question of dependency

Here again, like scale and isolation, the concept of dependence is a relative one, and must embrace that of interdependence in respect both of metropolitan and regional forces.

Economic dependence

This has been noted in the Editorial Introduction, but must at least be listed here as the dominant form of dependence to which other forms, such as those discussed below, are subordinate.

Cultural dependence

Formal educational systems, their values, assumptions and operations, are together with institutionalised religions of various types, the foremost vehicles for the maintenance of cultural dependency. Indeed their influence is so ingrained that, as Howard Fergus puts it, the cultures of most small states of the Commonwealth are 'hybrid'.

There is no way, given the international implications of political independence and the world status of the English language, that the situation will be reversed. Nonetheless, there is an urgent need to redress the balance between the international and the local components of the culture of most small states in favour of the latter, and this means fundamental curriculum reform.

Dimensions of educational dependency

Clearly the old metropolitan dimension of educational dependency remains very strong in many small nation states. The systems of educational administration and institutionalised learning are powerful agents of inertia that continue to constrain reforms. Likewise the nature and content of the curriculum in broad terms reflects a certain epistemological view that needs to be challenged beyond the stage of localisation of content within a received structure of knowledge.

The maintenance of metropolitan links through scholarships and other support to educators from small Commonwealth states, may assist the acquisition and enhancement of various skills but it is also a feature of continued dependency, as is the sustained hold over most educational publishing by companies based in the older developed nations.

Yet one of the implications of smallness of national scale is a greater degree of dependency than that experienced by larger states. Dependency is a fact of life, and in the post-independence experience of many small states, old metropolitan dependency has been joined, or in some cases supplanted, by new metropolitan dependency. By this is meant the development of links with, or receipt of support from other powerful states, for example the influence of the USA in educational development in the Commonwealth Caribbean, or the revival of the French connection in Mauritius and Seychelles, the interest of Australia in the Indian Ocean Islands and of Japan in the South Pacific. There is value for small states in many of these new links but there are added complications for the redirection of education towards internal local cultural imperatives.

Regional co-operation and interdependency

Some small states of the Commonwealth are isolated to an extent that co-operation in education with other small states is not logistically feasible at the present time. However, others exist in clusters where co-operation has been developed over several decades, notably in the Caribbean and South Pacific regions.

There is no doubt that regional co-operation, especially in respect of a shared university and systems of external examinations at secondary level has been strongly beneficial to all small states involved in each consortium, but the varying degrees of smallness of national scale have rendered these benefits differential. In other words, some states benefit more than others. To the extent that those states hosting a campus of the regional university benefit considerably, one may identify a new regional dependency experienced by the majority of smaller states in each region. This comes about through the tendency for students migrating to the university to remain in the campus states, in other words a 'brain drain'. In general, the smaller and more peripheral the state, the less the benefit from regional co-operation in respect of the shared university. In the area of shared external examinations, however, and especially in respect of the Caribbean Examinations Council, small members of the group have probably benefited as much as the others. Regional co-operation in education for small states is undoubtedly necessary and beneficial. It is just that there is a greater price to pay in terms of coping with local curriculum imperatives by the smaller, less influential members.

Educational profiles and trends

It is not for this chapter to comment in detail on the sectors and issues discussed in the specialist contributions which comprise this volume. However a brief overview can provide a backdrop for the national and regional observations which follow.

The primary sector

As in large states, this is a crucial formative stage, the success or failure of which will largely determine whether or not subsequent developments are successful. One of the advantages of national smallness has been the early establishment of universal primary education, at least in terms of basic provision, in most of the small Commonwealth states. Large developing countries with continued demographic increase are finding this goal much more difficult to achieve. On the other hand, the relatively early establishment of primary schooling in the small states had led to a longer tradition of received curriculum, and the development of conservative attitudes to education whereby the formal academic mode is perceived as most desirable. So for the aforementioned localisation of curriculum to be achieved, leading to a greater relevance in the contemporary context, the changes must begin in the primary sector. Attempts at fundamental reform in subsequent sectors are unlikely to take root otherwise. This is precisely what the 1979-83 reforms in Grenadian primary education were attempting to do, including the development of the new primary readers. It is unfortunate, not only for Grenada but for other small island states, that this attempt at localisation of primary curricula was terminated. This is not a response in respect of politics and ideology but rather in terms of the need for schooling in a small island state to correspond more closely with the realities of human ecology and local culture. There is no reason at all why reforms aimed at localisation should be detrimental to achieving high levels of literacy and numeracy during the primary stage.

The secondary sector

Patterns of secondary education are more variable than those of the primary sector as between the small states of the Commonwealth, but most involve selection at some stage. The question of selection is one of the most problematical in national education systems. Large, powerful and developed nations have tended to delay selection as long as possible so as to provide a broad general education for the majority of students. Small states have neither the capacity in terms

of the range of teacher expertise nor the economic scale to support such provision. Yet, as has already been mentioned, small independent states have at one and the same time, to provide for a greater localisation of curriculum and also for the servicing of sophisticated international links and duties. There has to be selection at some point, but it is important for those selected to proceed further in formal education and training to have continued regard to the local dimension. One aspect of secondary schooling that is not conducive to a productive partnership of local and international dimensions is for an influential minority to be schooled off-island in the private sector which normally adopts the traditional received curriculum style. In free societies, which these are, it is difficult to see how this will not continue, but if it does then localisation will remain at best a partial achievement.

At the upper secondary level much can be done to resolve the problem of high unit costs in small states by rationalising this stage with other forms of post-compulsory provision into some sort of tertiary college. This has been developed, or is in process of coming about, in some small states, for example, The Bahamas, Tonga and St Lucia. This is particularly attractive for the middle-range of small Commonwealth states where one such institution is sufficient to the task.

The tertiary sector

The type of development discussed in the previous paragraph can also be used to counter one of the problems experienced by small states, namely the early out-migration of talented young people seeking further and higher education. A tertiary college can provide, at least in a certain range of subjects, the level of tuition and materials support necessary to cover the first year, or perhaps two, of an undergraduate programme. Not only would this mean a shorter absence for those who proceed to campus states, or elsewhere, to complete their first degrees or technical qualifications, but it would also provide a valuable national facility. Even very small states could develop such a college, based on the upper secondary stage and a number of

vocational training areas, and this is being done in some places.

The question of teacher education and training, both initial and in-service, is central to any attempt to realise reform in the schooling system. Given the necessity to generate local research in order to service a more localised curriculum, and then to compile school materials from this information, the teaching force in a small nation state forms the only credible agency for such an activity. In the middle and larger range of small Commonwealth states where teachers' colleges are viable, these can also be the repositories of the necessary skills and resources for local research, which might in any case be supported by other faculties in the type of tertiary college mentioned above. In the smallest of the small, however, that is to say microstates with less than 30,000 people, it is not possible to provide a teachers' college. In such cases, teacher training has had to be off-island and therefore expensive to support. For this reason only a small number can be released and the target of a fully trained profession takes a very long time to achieve. In some such cases programmes of teacher education may be provided by external agencies but located in the small country itself. The expertise thus brought in can be directly related to the local context and assist in the generation of indigenous courses and materials.

The tertiary sector, including teacher education, is one in which regional co-operation is possible for those small countries that are suitably clustered. The advantages and disadvantages of a shared university for different categories of small state within a regional group have been noted above. Regional universities, and other regional organisations, may be able to combine in overcoming distance problems by way of using satellite systems. While the technology for this certainly exists, as do the systems, in both the Caribbean and the Pacific, there are problems of political control and local acceptability of curriculum content, which are of course related. It must be remembered that within each of these regions there exists a wide variety of cultures both between and within individual small states, and regional operations have to be just as sensitive to this as do any other agencies that are external to the region.

Regional universities differ in their structures. Whereas the University of the West Indies was formulated along traditional British lines as, initially, a college affiliated to the University of London, the University of the South Pacific adopted a more radical faculty design directed towards the perceived needs of the region. In practice, however, everything depends on the will of the faculty in both institutions, as to whether local needs are sufficiently addressed and catered for. There is a tendency for the smallest, and for the most remote states to claim, with some justification, that they benefit less than their larger colleagues from the shared university.

Conclusion

It is clear that considerable problems face those responsible for policies and provision in respect of education in the small nation states of the Commonwealth. It is also very difficult to generalise about the educational issues in a group of countries, which, although all small by world standards, range from about two million to just a few thousand in national population.

What is clear, however, is that many of the problems they face are due to smallness of scale, a relatively pronounced isolation, and a high degree of dependency of various kinds. As independent national units, and with diminishing opportunities for migration, there is a need for a greater localisation of curriculum at all levels and flexibility in reforming and managing their education systems. While, for cultural and practical reasons, localisation is desirable, indigenous material has to be researched and developed and international links serviced and maintained. There are fewer people available than in larger countries to do a wider variety of educational work.

So, if there is one goal that is common to all these nations, it is to develop a system that will produce a polyvalent output; generalists not only in academic but also in technical skills. Much value could be had from comparative and co-operative work between small Commonwealth states of a similar scale. Membership of the Commonwealth should be able to facilitate this.