

CHAPTER 3: EDUCATION AND ISOLATION

1. Variations on the theme of isolation in relation to education

- 1.1 In the Commonwealth Secretariat discussion paper, for 8CEC of which the present monograph is a development, the issue of isolation is afforded only five paragraphs out of 41. Given that the remit for this essay also places a greater emphasis on scale by setting a population, (under 2 million), rather than any other criterion for inclusion, isolation is examined mainly in terms of its links with the issue of scale, through which multiple disadvantage for many small countries is engendered.
- 1.2 However, it is necessary to consider first the concept of isolation according to more than just the customary spatial variant, significant though it obviously is. In other words, it is important to discuss isolation as well as remoteness. Both of course are relative indices per se, but also relate to each other, not necessarily with a high level of correlation. In addition to the spatial variants of isolation, it may also be useful to select political, social, and cultural variants for consideration.

2. The spatial variant

- 2.1 Within the spatial variant of isolation there are at least four components that have actual or potential relevance to the provision of educational services. First, there is distance, the element which relates to the idea of remoteness. Some of the countries in the sample have vast land areas to administer, and despite the very low density of population encountered in the interiors of Belize, Botswana and Guyana, the provision and administration of education has still to take place. The distances involved give rise not only to high transportation costs, but also permit of numerous hazards constraining the efficiency of distribution not only of materials, but also staff, information, ideas and sometimes even pupils. In addition to the propriety of providing educational facilities and opportunities to all citizens, however remote from the main clusters of population, there is also a question of national security. It was noted in Chapter 2 that all three countries face geopolitical pressures, so that in addition to the problem of basic provision, it is felt necessary to involve educational expertise in opening up and then 'controlling' the interior and peripheral zones of the country. Guyana's Hinterland Development Programme for young adults, Botswana's various non-formal programmes, and Belizean involvement in the United States aided Rural Education and Agricultural Project are all educational contributions to meeting these objectives.
- 2.2 Large distances in absolute terms are also encountered in widely dispersed multi-island nations like Fiji, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga and The Bahamas. Even using sea transport the costs of educational administration and provision are significantly increased, and in the Pacific the state of the ocean sometimes inhibits inter-island contact for considerable periods of time. Air transport has in some instances substituted for shipping and given its greater restrictions and cost has often engendered rather than reduced personal isolation as far as rural communities are concerned.
- 2.3 Distance is also a factor increasing potential co-operation between as well as within nations. In the South Pacific and Caribbean regions the smaller

Commonwealth nations have established regional programmes and institutions of education. The large distances involved greatly increase operating costs in comparison with their counterparts in more developed or compact countries. The logistical problems facing such bodies as the Universities of the West Indies and the South Pacific, and the Caribbean Examinations Council are extremely challenging and place a premium on individual and national expertise and commitment. Problems of separation and distance have contributed to difficulties in effecting and maintaining educational co-operation between Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

- 2.4 There are also extra-national and extra-regional distances to be considered. Small Commonwealth countries continue to maintain and sometimes rely on educational links with metropolitan and other developed countries. In general long distances and high costs are involved, but nearer sources of support may be either inferior in quality or unacceptable for political reasons.
- 2.5 Distance is a relative term, and what may be small in some countries may be large in others. Within small mountainous island nations such as Dominica and Saint Lucia, actual journey distances may exceed the straight line distance by more than double, and at the scale of individual pupils' walk to school may be inhibiting. This level of isolation occurs of course in larger nations also, but when compounded with the national and international dimensions can be disproportionately influential.
- 2.6 The second spatial component is aerial insulation or constriction. All nations have boundaries, but in the case of Island Developing and Other Specially Disadvantaged States the possibilities for cross-border interaction are limited. This is one of those matters, like most aspects of scale where small countries encounter a greater degree of constraint than do larger countries. Nonetheless it is ironical that national education systems are so tied up with national identity and political control mechanisms as to be a major factor fostering insularity of outlook within any particular country. The fact that small island nations are at the end of an international continuum of insularity is of universal significance in that:

"How they approach and adjust to this problem, and the role they variously assign to education in relation to ecology (human and otherwise), could be of more than academic interest to those of us whose insularity is more continentally based". (1)
- 2.7 This strong association between formal educational systems and the national spatial parameter is particularly inappropriate for very small countries whose concerns have increasingly to be with the local and international dimensions, at the interface between internal needs and external influences and systems.
- 2.8 Isolation, it has been remarked above, is a relative term. There are degrees of isolation even within small countries; within regions such as the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the South Pacific and Southern Africa whence our sample countries come; and within the world as a whole. Relative isolation is merely another way of describing the third spatial component, namely disparities in the distribution and density of human population. This is not exactly the same as saying that there are the same disparities in the distribution of primary education provision, at least in the small countries of the Commonwealth where universal primary provision is commonplace. There may well be disparities in the location of primary

schools for historical reasons such as differential mission activity. However at secondary level where, in underdeveloped economies it is not yet possible to provide a complete system, and even more at tertiary level, there are marked disparities in the accessibility of education. In small countries with large land areas and low population density, and in multi-island states, distance problems render the disparities of access even more irregular and extreme. This is not to say that political decisions play no part in the disparity - the political variant is considered below - but rather the more extreme demographic and geographic disparities found in small disadvantaged countries pose almost impossible problems for those charged with the provision and administration of education.

- 2.9 One of the most obvious manifestations of this phenomenon is that of the dichotomy between urban and rural sectors of countries in respect of access to post-primary education. Formal education is an essentially urban phenomenon in its origins and evolution that has been transmitted to rural areas. Be that as it may towns and cities have the concentration of post-compulsory educational facilities. In the small island nations exhibiting compactness (e.g., Barbados and Malta), there is no significant problem. In the low density, littoral countries many rural areas are isolated in respect of secondary and tertiary education, but given a willingness to migrate, it is possible to reach facilities by one of the basic modes of land transport - it is within the orbit of individual capability, though often very difficult. But in the multi-island nations the logistics of migration are more considerable as insularity intervenes. Nonetheless in such countries in the South Pacific, plus The Bahamas and Seychelles urbanisation is proceeding apace, even to the extent of some outer islands becoming rapidly depopulated.
- 2.10 The fourth and final spatial aspect pertaining to degree of isolation is that of networks of movement. This means that direct distance is not always accurate as an indication of degree of isolation, and this applies to movements of people, school materials, advisory services, and so on. Comment was made in Chapter 2 on the significance of the convergence of trading routes for corresponding economic growth and diversification in Malta, Barbados and Fiji. Many small countries are less fortunate, and there has often been a paradoxical increase in isolation as air transport has taken over from sea transport. Quite apart from the small inter-island movements of boats and ships providing relatively easy intra-regional migration, even the largest ship can anchor offshore and offload via local craft. There is no such equivalent in air transport.
- 2.11 Inside each country, even those with large land areas, the level of economy and technology does not permit more than a skeleton network of good roads outside of the main city, within which there may well have been disproportionate levels of public spending in view of its status and the life style of the urban elite. The smaller the country, the starker the contrast, unless the country is compact like Malta and Barbados, remembering that compactness is an economic and demographic as well as a geographic indicator. Barbados has been described as: "... a city where sugar grows in the suburbs" (2), and the sophistication and condition of the road network plus the efficient bus service enables journeys to school to take place in virtually any direction that may be necessary. Such a combination of international route focus and internal network is unusual and greatly assists the development and operation of educational services. By contrast, within the nearby islands of the Commonwealth Eastern Caribbean there are many locally isolated areas despite the relatively small scale of each country.

Those with genuine international airports and related tourist sectors (Antigua and Barbuda and Saint Lucia) are clearly less isolated, and the localised improvement of internal road networks is not unrelated. Hence Grenada's drive to gain an airport of this stature-one which is now nearing completion.

3. Political isolation

- 3.1 The second variant, political isolation has already been touched on in terms of aerial insulation and its educational implications. It is not only a question of political geography, but also of political status. Tables 2 and 3 in Chapter 1 give brief details of the independent, associated and dependent states of the Commonwealth. Even the dependent states have internal responsibility for educational provision, but in the last resort the responsibility for the maintenance of all services bear upon the overseeing power and there is a good chance of supplementary support from that source for education. Increased independence and in due course a fully independent status has obviously increased the degree of political isolation in terms of the cessation of metropolitan responsibility. For the economically poorer and/or low density politically independent nations new challenges have arisen in relation to this.
- 3.2 The most obvious is the cost of providing educational opportunities from within the national economy. Viewed from the perspective of the inevitably highly personalised world of the internal politics of a small state, educational decision-making and planning tend to take on a disproportionately high status. Not only is it taken to be the responsibility of the government to increase educational opportunity, but some sort of curriculum change becomes necessary to reflect the new national status and also to enable the government to effect whatever ideological influence it deems appropriate. Since very small countries in particular have few alternative sources of employment for formally educated manpower, teaching and other appointments in education are often highly prized opportunities. This has created a self-perpetuating mechanism but with diminishing opportunities for educational employment, due to the various constraints of scale. The world of education in a small country carries political muscle undreamed of by its counterparts in larger, especially developed countries. This heightened situation, despite, or perhaps because of the general interest in educational opportunity tends to operate as a conservative force. Consequently the sort of radical rethinking necessary to provide locally relevant educational support for the often very distinctive communities comprising small Commonwealth countries is not put to the test, unless a radically orientated government forces itself into power. If such a government has a strong ideological commitment - of whatever type - then there is merely a new orthodoxy for education to contend with. If the government is more open, it will have to confront the key issue of somehow educating the attitudes of its adult community to be willing to try out reforms, the objectives of which are to link the very local learning needs with the skills required for international co-operation. Unfortunately the political isolation of independent status seems to focus attention and effort at the conceptual level of the state.
- 3.3 In addition to the effect of political isolation on internal political pressures in respect of the administration and content of education, there is also the question of its effect on bilateral, multilateral or regional co-operation between groups of small nations. With reference to the regions whence come the sample nations there have been clear difficulties of co-operation in

southern Africa, the Commonwealth Caribbean and the South Pacific due in part to the close identification between education and national identity. This has to do with interdependency between small nations and will be discussed further under the heading of dependency in Chapter 4. Suffice it to say here that the coming into play of the full apparatus of political independence, however desirable that may be in itself, does not necessarily assist the successful development and operation of regional initiatives in education.

- 3.4 Some small states find themselves in the situation of being a political enclave isolated from their Commonwealth partners, and with rather overbearing neighbours. Candidates for this category are Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, The Gambia, Malta, The Bahamas, Belize, Gibraltar, British Virgin Islands, and the Falkland Islands. In some cases of course, such as The Bahamas and the British Virgin Islands, there is not so much a political as a cultural and administrative problem for education. In these two countries there is a direct link between local systems and those of the USA - in Florida and the US Virgin Islands respectively. The Southern African trio have obvious problems in relation to the Republic of South Africa, and their own relatively new universities are particularly important in providing an independent facility for high level human resource development. The Gambia, almost surrounded by Senegal has, since the abortive coup of 1981, moved politically closer to its neighbour, and this may have educational implications. Malta's situation is an intriguing one, bearing in mind the historical relationship between its nearest neighbours Italy and Libya, as well as the current regional significance of the latter. Not surprisingly then, in addition to the use of education in maintaining its longstanding nationality and unique language, both Italian and Arabic are important subjects in Malta. At it happens, and this has been clearly illustrated above, Malta has the most compact and well developed pattern of human ecology of all small Commonwealth countries, to which the various strands of educational activity contribute most significantly.
- 3.5 The cases of Belize, Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands are the most problematical, all being subject to territorial claims by neighbouring countries. Belize is a large area low density country with a high proportion of its population in Belize City. In order to stimulate colonisation and development of the interior the seat of government was removed some years ago to the new capital of Belmopan, located as near as possible to the centre of the territory. The Belizean authorities are very much aware of the need to maintain educational services in communities close to the boundaries with Guatemala and Mexico, especially as some ethnic groups, notably the Mayans straddle the border. Spanish is clearly important here, as it is in Gibraltar, a country where political isolation, combined in this case with very small physical and demographic scale has had important efforts in educational terms. Gibraltar's strategic status has supported a major garrison and the dockyard facility has been the mainstay of its economy and the source of considerable aid from Britain for educational development. The system is English, even to the extent of all initial teacher training being undertaken in England, as well as other areas of professional training. The only post-compulsory facility in the country is the Dockyard Technical College.
- 3.6 With the severe reductions in Britain teaching force, there can no longer be the confident expectation of employment there for the excess production of the Gibraltar system; likewise in the other professions. Following the closure of the naval dockyard there will be the possibility of its re-development as an area of manufacturing, processing and service industries, and if this happens a new direction in attitude as well as in organisation may have to be

taken by the administration. The border with Spain has been closed since 1969, and during that period subjective observations claim a noticeable decline in the standard of Spanish and of English. If this is so, it is due to the lack of day to day intercourse in good Spanish which being the language of the home then has a constraining effect on the standard of linguistic usage in general, including English. In this case the problem that is appearing is due to an intensification of political isolation due to the border closure by Spain, but somewhat similar problems also arise as a result of other forms of isolation.

4. Social and cultural isolation

- 4.1 Language problems are part of the general issue of social and cultural isolation, in respect of which education again stands in a paradoxical position. Smallness is not necessarily correlated with monolingualism. To take an extreme case, Vanuatu is estimated to have about 200 recognisable linguistic systems in a population of about 105,000.
- 4.2 Most of the small countries of the Commonwealth exist in their present form as a result of colonisation, and therefore this issue relates also to aspects of dependency. In some such countries the indigenous culture has been strong enough to survive, at least linguistically, alongside the versions of British culture imparted by colonising influences, and has reasserted itself after the achievement of independence. Malta has already been mentioned in this respect, and the Southern African trio, while using English for most formal education purposes, strongly retain their various local languages for social life and therefore informal education. The Gambia is similar in this respect, there being five or six main languages used, all indigenous.
- 4.3 It is in the small Commonwealth countries of the tropical island zones that a socio-cultural isolation is particularly evident. In all three cases, Caribbean, Indian Ocean and South Pacific, the contemporary appearance on the international political scene of a significant number of microstates is the outcome of the maritime nature and global logistics of the British Imperial system of a past age. During that period the general pattern of indirect rule and in many cases crown colony government greatly enhanced the idiosyncrasy of each island territory. In the case of the South Pacific, due to the results of previous colonisations, voyages and conflicts involving the various peoples of Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia, as well as to the comparatively greater distances between island clusters, there was by the time of European colonisation a fairly well established pattern of cultures. British administration seemed merely to freeze the pattern and add whatever idiosyncracies emerged from individual governors and officers of the colonial service. In other words the particular style of colonialism adopted served to enhance rather than reduce the relative isolation of island cultures one from another. The particular character of the infusion of a British element into the evolving culture of each emerging nation of what is now the Commonwealth South Pacific, depended very much on the particular mix of Christian mission involvement. Given that the matter of formal educational provision was left almost entirely in the hands of these various missions, and bearing in mind the distinctiveness of the island cultures, a legacy of national idiosyncrasy was bequeathed that has proved a troublesome legacy for regional educational initiatives in the South Pacific to cope with.
- 4.4 Variations on a general theme of unity and diversity continue within the

sometimes numerous components of multi-island states. At the very local level many of these Pacific communities run economies on a very limited natural resource base and in subtle adjustment to the island ecosystem (3). Any pattern of education that is not able to itself adjust to such circumstances is unlikely to be helpful to the economic survival and development of such groups.

- 4.5 The broad case of the Commonwealth Caribbean, Mauritius, Seychelles and to some extent the major islands of Fiji is somewhat different. While sharing with the South Pacific islands the same style of colonial administration with its idiosyncracies and differential mission involvement in education, this set of territories was much more involved in the mainstream of colonial exploitation through the plantation system, and to a considerable extent still is. Some economic consequences of this will be mentioned in Chapter 4 under dependency, but there are also important social and cultural implications for education.
- 4.6 In this group of territories the history of plantations has involved the immigration, often in conditions of slavery, of a labour force from outside the area. With the exception of Fiji, and possibly Mauritius, the original inhabitants of these places, sometimes very few, were eliminated, and a mainly negro slave labour force traded in from Africa. Vestiges of African culture and language were suppressed, and on the abolition of slavery, the freed slaves established new communities outside of the plantations for which in several islands indentured labour from the Indian Sub-Continent was subsequently brought in. The result is a variety of multicultural settings, each distinctive, but in a number of cases remarkably comparable across the island zones.
- 4.7 For example, given the ethnic composition of contemporary Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad and Tobago, illustrated in Chapter 1, Figure 1, it is not surprising to find today very similar social tensions appearing in respect of the generally superior educational achievements of the sector of the population of Indian origin. So, in addition to a national or island socio-cultural isolation, there tends to be very distinct internal disparities related to multi-variate relationships of colour, class, religion/denomination, as the following quotation in respect of Port-of-Spain in Trinidad illustrates:

"The social structure that emerges from the (1960) analysis is composed of a segmented Creole group with the Indian and other minorities aligning themselves with the upper portion or stratum of the Creoles. The Creole upper stratum is characterised by a division into two parts, the upper part being associated with professional status, university education and Presbyterianism; and the lower part correlating more closely with non-manual status, secondary levels of education, and Roman Catholicism, and reflecting the coloured middle class ... the low status sub-group is characterised by skilled or unskilled status, employment as domestics, the practice of common law and visiting unions and achievement of low educational levels. It is also closely associated with the Anglican Church and representative of the status of the majority of the Negro population."
(4)

- 4.8 If we add to the linguistic diversity of a multicultural community, the particular linguistic situation of the mass of the negro population of most Caribbean Commonwealth states we encounter another feature of cultural isolation of great significance for education. The ancestors of these people were prevented from using their African languages and from learning English during the long period of slavery. The result has been that in each island there has developed a largely unwritten and relatively limited creole or patois as the social language. In other words the legacy of colonisation has been to isolate people linguistically and put them in a position where, unlike in the majority of Pacific islands, the mother tongue may place considerable constraints on general linguistic and educational development.
- 4.9 In summary then, most tropical island nations of the Commonwealth exhibit an individual and unique mix of cultural and social structures placing each nation in a position of socio-cultural isolation. That most of these countries are now politically independent and require of their educational systems an enhancement of national identity merely compounds the challenge of isolation.

5. Summary

- 5.1 In summary it can clearly be seen that isolation for small Commonwealth countries takes several forms, any of which will tend to compound problems of scale. Isolation is not just a question of remoteness with increased transport costs and logistical problems of educational administration. It is a relative not an absolute matter, in which political, geographical, socio-cultural and biological variants combine to create not only patterns of disparity in educational provision but also individual, community and national perspectives on the outside world. The fact that an education system with an approved structure and content is part of the regulatory apparatus of the modern state, and that many small countries are now politically independent, clearly illustrates the isolationist potential of formal education. Paradoxically it, together with non-formal and informal education has also the potential to combat isolation, both in technological capabilities - such as distance teaching by satellite - and in the promotion of integrationist attitudes at all levels from the individual school curriculum to international co-operation involving small countries. It is paradoxical that when a small country administration does attempt an integrationist solution to the problem of educational disadvantage in the more isolated outlying components of any nation, it may well be rebuffed by the received image and status of education already held by the remote communities involved. It is access to the highly selective, socially desirable academic secondary school with its fragmented curriculum of isolated subjects that is desired. Such is the influence of informal conventional wisdom that it has found no difficulty in reaching even the most remote regions and does not require literacy for its message to be accepted.
- 5.2 Isolation is most potent not in physical terms but in its contribution to valued notions of individual and national identity which form part of the dependency legacy of colonialism, and its model of schooling in particular.

References

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