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# Learning from Comparative Research in Education – and from the Distinctive Experience of Small States

**Abstract:** In a global context where national education and social policies are increasingly shaped by the influence of powerful global agendas, international surveys and league tables – combined with a search for so called ‘best practice’ – much can be learned from context-sensitive, comparative research that challenges one-size-fits-all assumptions. The paper examines this critique, in the light of recent research that demonstrates how many small states worldwide are prioritising educational policy trajectories that are different, out of step, or in advance of those advocated in much of the dominant international literature and discourse. In doing so, the analysis highlights the importance of contextual differences in educational policy development and in disciplined comparative and international research in education. In concluding, it is also argued that there is much that the international community can learn from such comparative research and from the distinctive experience of small states.

**Key words:** small states, comparative education, policy transfer.

## Introduction

Publicity relating to the OECD’s Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) has contributed to the increased interest of policy makers, planners and practitioners worldwide in the field of comparative and international research in education. However, this stimulus is also perpetuating a new era of simplistic and uncritical international educational policy transfer. This is despite the fact that the latter has long been a central concern of disciplined comparative research in education, reflecting Sir Michael Sadler’s often quoted warning that:

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower

from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. (Sadler, 1900, p. 49)

Today, policy proposals can spread worldwide at the touch of a computer button, stimulated by the search for so called ‘best practice’ to borrow and apply. This article draws upon the author’s theoretical work on education policy transfer (Crossley & Watson, 2003; Crossley, 2014), and on recent empirically grounded research on educational policies and priorities in small states (Crossley et al., 2011). In doing so, it articulates a cautionary note for others engaged in educational research, policy and practice in times of intensified globalisation.

### **Global Educational Agendas and Targets**

The launching of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the year 2000 helped to reinforce international commitment to the Education For All (EFA) targets first established in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 (UNESCO, 1990). Now, however, concern is increasingly focussed upon how education systems are performing in relation to these goals, if they will meet their targets by the deadline of 2015, and what is to follow in the post-2015 Development Framework (UNESCO, 2010). Access to basic education (widely defined as primary schooling in practice) has dominated these global agendas, although the associated need for quality is now, if belatedly, also prioritised. In the light of this, other dimensions and sectors of education have had to compete for attention and resources, including higher education and, perhaps most ironically, basic education and lifelong learning for adults, that was originally emphasised in the concept of basic education that was formulated at Jomtien.

While global goals and targets do have much to offer, they can also be problematic in generating unrealistic and inappropriate one-size fits all solutions. Disciplined research in comparative and international education, for example, continues to build upon Sadler’s benchmark position by demonstrating how successful educational reform must fit specific needs and conditions and, to cite my own work, and a piece written with Professor Peter Jarvis, how ‘context matters’ more than many policy makers and researcher realise (Crossley & Jarvis, 2001). Successful learning from elsewhere, it is argued, requires local ‘agency’ to engage actively and critically with international education experience, or surveys and league tables, along with a commitment to re-develop or challenge external strategies and initiatives in ways that genuinely meet local needs.

With 2014 being declared the United Nations International Year for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and when World Cup football in Brazil, and the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, Scotland are noted by the presence and success of many small states, the next section applies the comparative perspectives explored above and examines what others can learn from the distinctive experience of small states worldwide.

### Definitions of Small States

The next sections draw from and build upon the text for a recent analysis of scale as a concept in comparative education (Brock & Crossley, 2013). The world of small states is not limited to the popular conception of single island nations, but what is defined as a 'small' state? This is necessarily arbitrary, although the most widely accepted contemporary definition is that of a nation or territory with less than three million people. According to Martin and Bray (2011) there are 89 states or territories – that is to say about 46% of the polities of the world – in this category. These authors exclude territories with less than 1000 inhabitants but, in terms of education, there are still over 100 systems in this category worldwide. This suggests that small states are likely to have greater significance than their modest visibility in the international literature would indicate. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the 89 small states and territories according to region and population.

**Table 1:** Matrix of small states and territories by population and region.

| Region        | <100k     | 100–250k  | 250k–1m   | 1–2m     | 2–3m      | Total     |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Africa        | 0         | 1         | 3         | 5        | 2         | 11        |
| Arab States   | 0         | 0         | 2         | 0        | 2         | 4         |
| Atlantic      | 5         | 0         | 1         | 0        | 0         | 6         |
| Caribbean     | 8         | 6         | 5         | 1        | 1         | 21        |
| Europe        | 7         | 1         | 5         | 1        | 4         | 18        |
| Indian Ocean  | 1         | 0         | 2         | 0        | 1         | 4         |
| South Pacific | 11        | 6         | 3         | 0        | 0         | 20        |
| Asia          | 0         | 0         | 3         | 1        | 1         | 5         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>32</b> | <b>14</b> | <b>24</b> | <b>8</b> | <b>11</b> | <b>89</b> |

Source: Derived from United Nations Statistics Division 1988 (Martin and Bray 2011, 26–27).

## Learning from Small States

The literature on education in small states dates back to an influential pan – Commonwealth conference that was held in Mauritius during 1985 (Bacchus & Brock, 1987). Subsequent Commonwealth supported work included a series of national, regional and pan–Commonwealth meetings and workshops – and related publications on specific issues such as Ministry of Education planning, tertiary education and post-secondary education in small states.

Until the 1990s, much of this work was mainly concerned with issues faced by small island nations, and especially those in the three main oceanic locations of the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and South Pacific. This initial literature also tended to focus on the distinctive problems faced by education, rather than the strengths and advantages experienced by small states. Issues of scale, vulnerability, isolation and dependency thus characterised the early educational literature. Among the key disadvantages identified were: high levels of dependence upon foreign advice, support and resources; high unit costs; lack of relevant teaching materials, including texts that focused on local geography, history and science; and related regional dependency linked to the dominance of regional hubs where greater educational and employment opportunities were available. Some advantages generated by the small scale of education systems were also beginning to be noted such as the early achievement of universal primary education.

## Contemporary Issues and Developments

At the turn of the millennium the intensification of globalisation was increasingly apparent across all sectors of society and the international scale of educational development commanded ever closer attention (Dale, 2000). As argued earlier, the influence of international agendas and targets, and related implications for the international transfer of educational policy and practice, similarly generated renewed global interest in comparative and international research in education (Crossley & Watson, 2003).

Within the Commonwealth such factors underpinned a forward looking review of existing work on education in small states (Crossley & Holmes, 1999). This challenged what by then was seen to have been an over-emphasis upon the vulnerabilities and problems of small states. It also critiqued strong tendencies in the existing literature and international agency discourse to over-emphasise the potential of generic educational policy proposals derived from perceived ‘best practice’ in selected contexts. In such ways the literature on small states most

clearly demonstrated the limitations of 'one size fits all' educational policy solutions and proposals, and helped to highlight significant implications for future policy deliberations and theoretical scholarship. More recent research (Crossley et al., 2011), for example, has demonstrated how contemporary educational priorities for many small states differ from the access to primary schooling issues that have dominated the international agendas, and focus upon improvements to quality, inclusivity and equity, lifelong learning, the potential of ICT and tertiary education.

On a broader level, research in comparative education has similarly re-connected with earlier phases of scholarship on policy borrowing and transfer, developing helpful models of the processes involved (Phillips & Ochs, 2004), and more nuanced understandings of the political dimensions and mediations between those involved at different levels – and on different scales [see for example, Beech, 2006; Rappleye, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow's (2012) analysis of the evolution of the literature on policy borrowing and lending]. Writers on and from small states, such as Baldacchino and Bray (2001), continued to analyse the pertinence of the conceptual categorisation, but, in practice, despite its acknowledged limitations and the need for careful use and qualification, it has proved resilient – and for many it is still meeting 'the tests of time' (Baldacchino, 2012). Louisy (2011), for example, argues that in the face of intensified globalisation there is much that small states can derive from working together, and from collaborative initiatives – and that, in doing so, there is also much that the wider international community can learn from small states.

## Conclusions

In looking to the future more can certainly be done within existing parameters, and by and for those small states that have traditionally dominated the international literature. A new generation of comparative and international research on education in small states is, however, also called for, and in ways that further strengthen context sensitivity, local voice, international analyses and work beyond traditional parameters. New research in the Gulf small states is, for example, already emerging; more work on the neglected Overseas Territories is long overdue; and comparative analyses of Baltic post-Soviet small states and in European and Balkan contexts offer especially timely and challenging potential for the future.

New questions also emerge from this. What, for example, could the existing theoretical literature on education in small states have to offer for future scholarship? To what extent might the experience of small states of, for instance,

the concept of 'managed intimacy', be helpful for others beyond this specific literature; what can be learned from their extensive encounter with outward migration and related linkages with an extensive Diaspora; how can the international community benefit from the experiences of small states in enhancing the quality of education, in promoting tertiary education, by developing inclusivity and lifelong learning opportunities (Crossley, Sukwianomb & Weeks, 1988); and of using Teacher Recruitment Protocols in the face of heightened professional mobility (Penson & Yonemura, 2012); what educational implications stem from contemporary challenges to the high-profile of the financial sector in small states such as Iceland and Cyprus; and how might new research on such themes and in different small state contexts add to or challenge existing knowledge and understandings?

More broadly, as indicated at the outset of this article – and as argued by writers such as Louisy (2011) – there is much more that the wider international, professional and academic communities can learn from the experiences of small states. Looking first at the global arena for post-2015 development planning, research on the tensions experienced by many small states when engaging with EFA and MDG agendas is particularly revealing. As we have demonstrated earlier, the small scale of their education systems has enabled many small states to move ahead relatively rapidly in terms of many of the international targets established for basic education. From the 1990s their educational needs and priorities were, therefore, often quite different to those reflected in the dominant international agendas and discourse. Consequently, they often sought external support for educational initiatives that pressed well beyond sectors and issues where international support and funding was then being made available.

As targets and goals for the post-2015 era are now being formulated, this small state experience can help to caution against the similar replication of a new set of fixed, universal and inflexible educational goals and targets. In the light of this experience the strengths and limitations of current and emergent global agendas can be more clearly assessed and, while some may use this to challenge their basic rationale, it can also be argued that a greater degree of contextual flexibility has much to offer, if willing engagement with such global agendas is to be maximised and if the extent of successful implementation in practice is to be increased.

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## Učenje iz komparativnih istraživanja obrazovanja i specifičnih iskustava malih država

**Apstrakt:** U globalnom kontekstu u kojem je oblikovanje nacionalnog obrazovanja i socijalnih politika sve više pod uticajem moćnih globalnih agendi, međunarodnih istraživanja i rang lista, a u kombinaciji sa potragom za takozvanom „najboljom praksom”, dosta može da se nauči iz komparativnog istraživanja koje je osetljivo na kontekst i koje dovodi u pitanje pretpostavku da postoji jedno rešenje za sve. Rad se bavi razmatranjima skorijih istraživanja koja su pokazala koliko malih država širom sveta svoje obrazovne prioritete, planove i programe definiše drugačije, čak u raskoraku sa onima koji se zagovaraju u većem delu međunarodne literature i u dominantnim diskursima, ili su čak korak ispred njih. Time ova analiza ističe koliko je važan kontekst u razvoju obrazovne politike, kao i ozbiljna komparativna i međunarodna istraživanja u okviru obrazovanja. U zaključku je izneto mišljenje da međunarodna zajednica može mnogo toga da nauči od ovakvih komparativnih istraživanja i od specifičnog iskustva malih država.

**Ključne reči:** male države, komparativno obrazovanje, transfer politika.