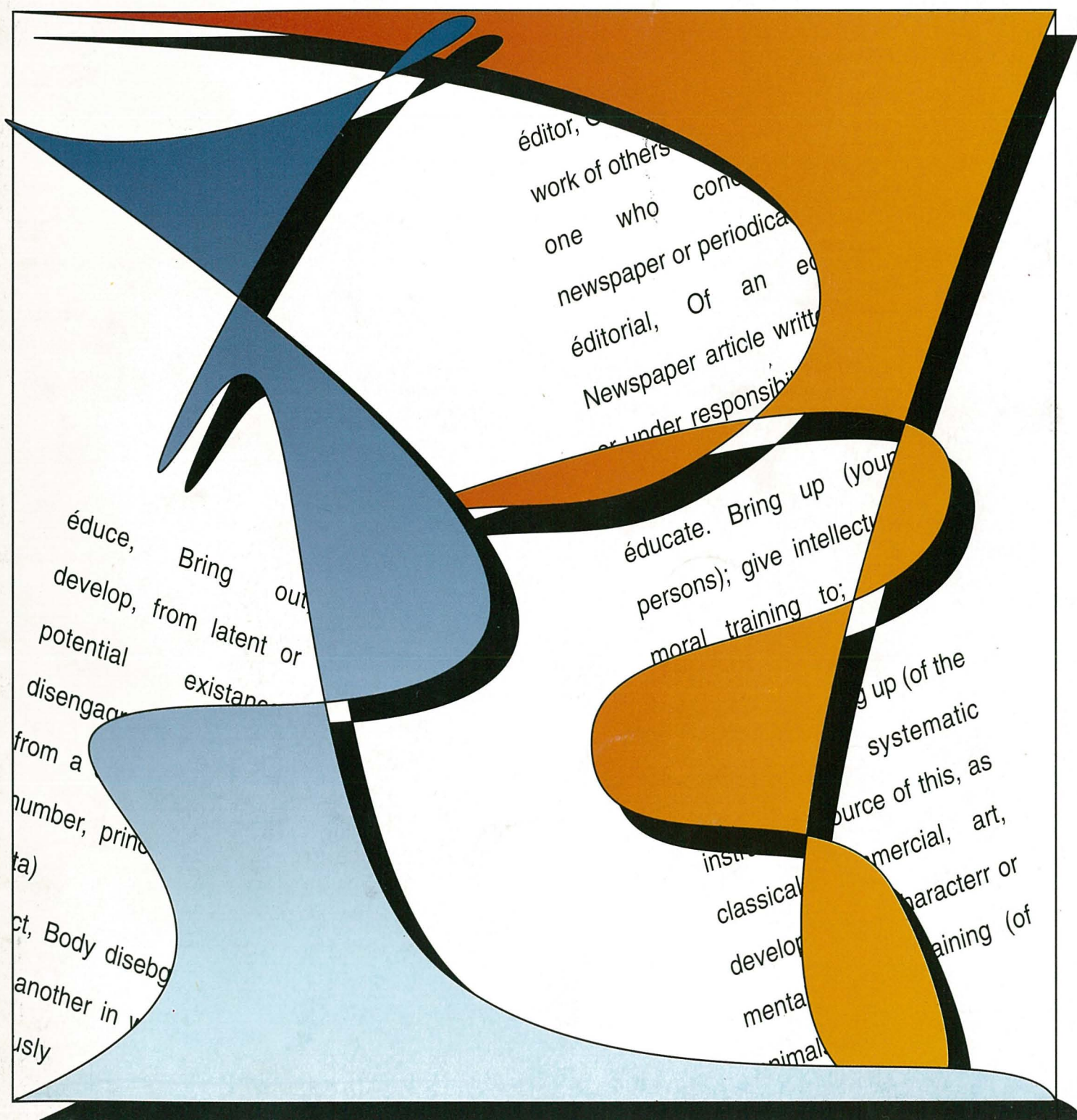


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A Small State perspective to education? A Review Article

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BRAY, Mark & Steve PACKER (1993)
*Education in Small States: Concepts, Challenges
& Strategies*, Oxford, Pergamon Press (Volume
13, Pergamon Comparative & International Edu-
cation Series) ISBN 0-08-041033-2, xxix + 245pp
+ Bibliography + Index.

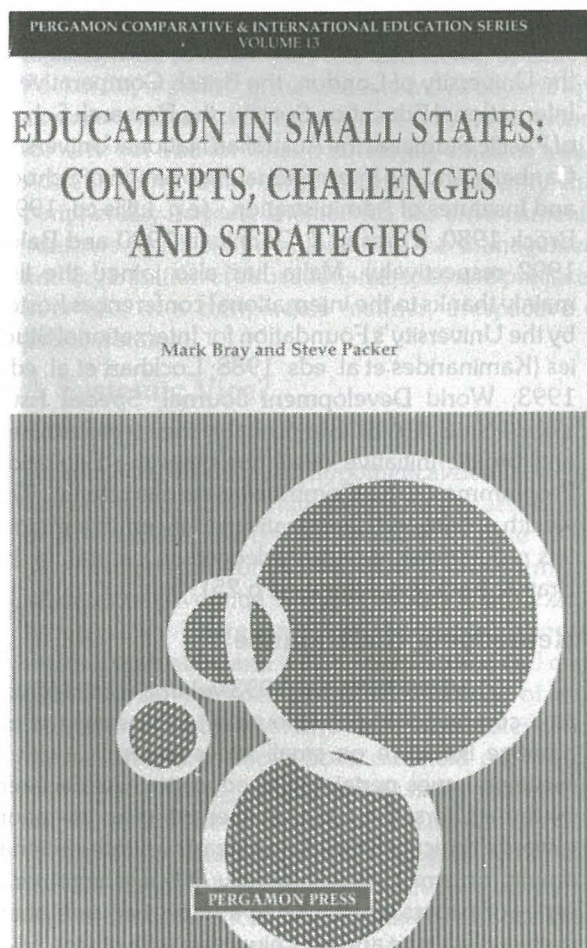
Even a cursory glance at this neat hardback volume with a 400- plus item bibliography is enough to confirm that concern with the condition of the world's smallest, and arguably least significant, states has definitely come a long way. From the flotsam and jetsam of empire, the world's contemporary small states and territories have managed to generate substantial interest in their own predicament to erode the fallacy that out of sight is invariably out of mind.

A Bountiful Population...

If there is anything not controversial about small states, it is that the world is full of them. Irrespective of what constitutes small - a definitional problem which is bound to remain contentious because of the relativity of the term - any classification would carry along with it a bountiful collection of jurisdictions straddling the globe. There are some 36 politically independent small states with a resident population of less than one million on the world's political map today; and there are over 40 other small, still politically dependent yet administratively distinct, territories with an equally small population. Evident concentrations occur in the Eastern Caribbean, the South Pacific, the Persian Gulf and the Western Indian Ocean.

...But Sparse Consideration

Nevertheless, in spite of such bounty, there has been a fairly obvious sociology of absence at work here, a subtle yet pervasive historical process of negation which manifests itself in the absence of the consideration of the predicament of small states and territories. The reasons for this are various: Marketability dictates and print run considerations obviously penalise the marginal and peripheral unless depicted in accordance to some tantalising stereotype; remoteness and isolation makes communication between



such territories financially prohibitive, so that they have little opportunities to cultivate comparative research or dialogue; and a strong cultural disposition towards the metropole (typically the former colonising power) makes such small territories and their policy-makers rather indifferent to the plight of similar small states elsewhere.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find that the main agencies willing and able to carry out such an exercise of ventilation, of a country-specific or comparative kind, have been international bodies committed to promote the interests of their members, of which small states typically constitute a significant and vocal sub-category. These have included the International

sub-category. These have included the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) of UNESCO in treating educational policy and planning - (e.g. Atchoarena 1993); The United Nations, particularly via the secretariat of its standing conference on Trade & Development (e.g. UNCTAD 1985a,b); and the World Bank (given its involvement in country programmes concerning economic development strategies). Other notable and sustained contributions have been forthcoming from the Institute of Education of the University of London, the British Comparative & International Education Society, the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University, Canberra and the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration - (e.g. Lillis ed. 1993; Brock 1980; Throsby & Gannicott 1990 and Baker 1992 respectively). Malta has also joined the lists mainly thanks to the international conferences hosted by the University's Foundation for International Studies (Kaminarides et al. eds. 1988; Lockhart et al. eds. 1993; World Development Journal, Special Issue Vol.24 No.2, 1993). But probably the most sustained and prolific initiative of all has been the Education Programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The wealth of data and comparative insight emergent from this programme are acknowledged as 'central' to the Bray & Packer volume (text p.25).

Remedying the Balance

The Bray & Packer 1993 volume comes across as a commendable contribution to the sparse comparative literature on small states generally, with a focus on issues pertaining to education. As declared by the authors, the text is conceived as an invitation towards a rectification of the dearth of international inquiry on small states generally. It brings together a series of papers which its two authors had published previously, alone and in conjunction with others, over a span of some 7 years in a variety of international journals (Attwood & Bray 1989; Bray 1990, 1991; Bray & Fergus 1986; Bray & Hui 1989; Packer 1991). These are supplemented by new material, both of a conceptual and of a case study inclination, making the text stand easily on its own as a compendium on small state theorisation grounded in a wealth of data. It would be fair to state that the collection represents the most exhaustive consideration of the issue of education in small states to date, with a bias in favour of former British colonies. The two authors after all can not only boast of vast personal experience in most of the world's small states and territories but also an impressive set of publications to their credit in the field,

mainly through their involvement in various initiatives of the Commonwealth Secretariat (e.g., Bray ed. 1991; Bray et al. 1991; Bray 1992; Packer 1989).

Layout

The book is organised in four main sections. The first proposes an overview of small states from the perspective of key organising themes: The definition of size, statehood and international relations, economic development, social relations and political order. A similar outlook colours the second section which, taking education as the key category, sets up a framework for the appraisal of its provision and administration, with implications on curricula, examinations, certification, aid management and regional co-operation. The third section is devoted to case studies: Formerly published but updated material on Brunei Darussalam, Montserrat and Macau is joined by two new country reports, on Bhutan and the Solomon Islands. The concrete and specific are used to good effect to operationalise the conceptual baggage concerning educational issues teased out earlier; while respecting the unique historicity of each country's situation. The fourth and final section reviews from a comparative perspective, the concepts, challenges and strategies suggested by the earlier arguments as informed by their empirical deployment.

Key Concerns

The concern which seeps through the Bray & Packer volume is distinctively twofold. The first is to present the population of small states and territories as distinct ecologies, with an idiosyncratic cluster of advantages and disadvantages which cry out loud for evaluation on their own terms. This is an important principle: The authors may have felt obliged to prop up the allegation, now an established Commonwealth Secretariat slogan, that small states "have an ecology of their own" (see text p.230). Bray & Packer (1993) is possibly the first volume to address this statement head on, meticulously justifying the conceptual validity of the population of small states and territories. Prior to the publication of this text, one might easily have entertained the thought that this assertion (and its associated universe of cases) was mainly a political and diplomatic expediency, given that, out of 50 member states of the Commonwealth in 1993, 28 had populations below 1.5 million (text p.24).

The second concern of the authors, and following on from the first, is perhaps best illustrated by referring to their concluding remark: "Smallness should not be unduly romanticised; but neither should it be

unduly condemned" (text p.247). Indeed, there are competing and confusing stereotypes which laud microstates with the wonders and tastes of paradise or damn them as prisons and labour camps (e.g. Lowenthal 1992; Naipaul 1972). Baffled, if not frustrated, microstate citizens refer to the endless stream of international, albeit one presumes well-meaning, foreign advisors who drum up business by proposing ready-made solutions to small states (text p.181). With similar deductive presumption, small states has now been made synonymous with beauty (Schumacher 1973); considered as hopeful candidates for practicality (Bray et.al. 1991); possibilities (McRobie 1981); subject to vulnerability (Commonwealth Consultative Group 1985) and danger (Harden 1985).

This volume bravely strives to break loose from this arrogance. The text comes across as a celebration of patterned diversity. There is no premeditated conclusion as to whether the balance will tip in favour or against the small state's factor endowments; as with Selwyn's (1975) contention, there are clearly both economies and diseconomies of scale.

A Distinct Category?

The authors' key assertion that "small states are of undeniable importance" (text p.xxviii) may indeed prove to be so, particularly to the microstates' own citizens. This may certainly help to justify the *raison d'être* of such a text to the large proportion of readers of this book. These will, more likely than not, have little first-hand knowledge of small states and territories. It may however prove too much to claim that small states and territories constitute a distinctive conceptual category.

Claim for methodological exclusivity reduces the spill-over effect of concepts and tools of analysis which, while patiently culled and developed in the context of smallness, may prove applicable to milieux not limited to the world's lilliputs. The authors actually allude to such spill-over possibilities when considering the (after Benedict 1966, 1967) distinction between small **size** and small **scale**; Demos(1982) and his documentation of multiple role interactions across multiple role sets or Smith (1990) and his attempt at extrapolating small state analysis to the analysis of educational administration in the outer islands of Scotland (see text pp. 37). Such invitations to go beyond the small jurisdiction to small-scale (albeit large-size) settings elsewhere is so far an untapped research domain which is unfortunately not taken up in the theoretical synthesis of this volume.

Indeed, such an extrapolation appears to have been set by the authors in their defence of political sovereignty as not being a significant variable in entertaining the effect of smallness on education. They readily lump together politically dependent territories with politically independent states into the cauldron. The fusing may be debatable, particularly in considerations of international diplomacy and development strategy (e.g. Baldacchino 1993). But it appears strategically wise to down-play this distinction, as Bray & Packer do, especially if the idea is to move beyond and explore whether smallness doesn't only have lessons for itself but also for what is differently small as well... Administrative autonomy, isolation, insularity and peripherality suggest themselves as environmental contours which shape or influence the management and organisation of educational policies and practices, *inter alia*, in a comparable manner, irrespective of juridical status.

A Systemic Vice?

The text nevertheless finds it impossible to escape completely from hypothetical-deductive assertions which stubbornly determine the assessment of small states' assets and liabilities. In spite of the penchant concern for an own ecology, the normative orientation governing such a concern is not exactly home-grown. There remains a strong orientation towards a tabulation and weighing up of pros and cons. This I would consider a common critique of most international organisational focus on small states which, as the authors correctly point out (text p.244), are mostly conducted outside small states rather than within them. The exercise thus seems unduly consumed by the "challenges and strategies" rather than the "concepts"; it is too fervently taken up by the imperative to transform and upgrade. The orientation is definitely towards change and development, rather than understanding (Commonwealth Secretariat 1989, p.2). Nothing wrong in that; except that, in so doing, it is parameters, blindly accepted as globally relevant and bred beyond the small state, which are the implicit benchmarks.

The claimed ecological distinctiveness does not, it seems to me, spill over beyond the strategic. The broader environment is a given, much like a functionalist, systems analysis. What ought to be is often dictated by dispassionate and aloof impressions and interpretations which fail to appraise fully the social, economic and political logic of smallness. This is in part a consequence of considering small states as 'problems' (Bray 1987); as well as, let us admit, a receptor

cultural orientation which so often makes the microstate policy-maker all too keen to accept, indeed to demand, the prescriptions of international 'experts' in good faith. Hence the urgency to reform easily takes precedence over the challenge to come to grips fully with what is.

The odd outcome of such a process is that there are deeper levels of analysis, behavioral rather than institutional, processual rather than structural, which have so far remained largely unresearched and even unacknowledged within the microstate literature. So many prescriptions seem to make sound common sense, from a policy perspective; but these are unlikely to work in practice as conceived on the academic drawing-board because they fail to take into consideration the rich repertoire of reactionary behaviour by policy transmitters (such as bureaucrats or politicians) and policy targets (workers, citizens, consumers); they are not confronted by what is apparently a different blend - that is, practical, empirical, coherent, good sense - at the microstate level which 'infects' the deployment of 'sound' policy formulations.

Is it the transnational, comparative nature of the grand project which inhibits research pursuits in this direction? Or else, are the incumbent researchers oblivious of such levels of investigation? Or again, have they failed to conceive of such levels as idiosyncratic to, or associated with, smallness? The most astute and sensitive would even perhaps be fully aware of these lilliputian characteristics but decide, unconsciously or otherwise, that they had best remain undisturbed. The morality adopted is systemic and policy-driven rather than inclusive of the pursuit of the microstate actor's interest maximising behaviour.

Environmental Wisdom

In spite of manifesting themselves as locations of widespread cultural vulnerability, the behavioural practices of citizens in small states and territories have yet to prove vulnerable to external, especially big-state, researchers. Strategies and challenges cannot presume validity if they fail to take account of 'environmental wisdom': This is the rich, making-sense action repertoire of individuals, in small states as elsewhere, who daily make history by negotiating survival. The potential challenge for both theory and practice in this field is actually to become aware and explore how this behavioural syndrome is developed and deployed. Only then, and in relation to such behaviour, would strategic considerations bear a worthy and privileged relevance.

Examples of such a discrepancy between neat policy rhetoric and practice include: The alleged limitations of economies of scale; the recommendations for a generalist rather than a specialist orientation in education; the imputed ease of communication in small territories; the presumed liability of professional isolation...

Respectful of the 'Mdina defence syndrome' (Chircop 1994), I will not elaborate here on other examples or on the details of how the policy pronouncements may read as dogmatic. Consider my decision as an invitation to the academically curious to seriously take up the investigation of the human geography or anthropology of smallness; while saluting all those who instinctively understand what I mean, even though they may not be capable of putting their finger on it other than in terms of personal experiences, vague and uncorroborated impressions or simply cultural words of wisdom.

Perhaps it is my ascribed status as a microstate citizen which invariably forces me to come to terms with my (small) world as is, prior to rushing to elaborate on what constitutes its challenges (text pp.237) in progressing towards how someone, somewhere, has decided that the goal or model should be. It appears more important (to me at least) to aim first for a domestically and inductively-based sensibility of the environment, as much part of the ecology of smallness as its purported set of merits and demerits.

An Invitation to Peripheral Comparison

There is therefore much to be said for a research methodology which invites Maltese and other microstate policy makers, administrators, practitioners and even clients of the local educational system to consider the experiences not of the United Kingdom, the United States, France or Italy for a change, but the 'periphery of the periphery': The Portugese colony of Macau in South-East Asia; the landlocked Himalayan state of Bhutan; the oil-rich Malay Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam; the small British Caribbean island colony of Montserrat; and the archipelagic independent state of the Solomons in the South Pacific. So many readers may be coming across these names for the first time. The insights to be drawn are as instructive as they are surprising.

My thanks to Mark Bray and Steve Packer for reacting to an earlier draft of this review article. Of course this does not mean that they agree with its tenet.

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