

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Tavis D. Jules and Patrick Ressler (Eds.) (2017). *Re-reading education policy and practice in small states: Issues of size and scale in the emerging intelligent society and economy*. Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang. ISBN: 978-3-631-62751-8, 281pp; €55.95c.**

Research in small states, including educational research in small states, has been around for quite some time now; long enough to no longer merit being regarded as a topic that only recently has attracted the attention it deserves, contrary to what the two editors state in their introduction to this book (p. 23). This work has been going on since at least the mid-80s, particularly, as far as education goes, through the Commonwealth series of publications in the area spearheaded by M. Kazim Bacchus and Colin Brock's 1987 volume *The challenge of scale*. It has certainly attracted the interest of a whole coterie of writers primarily from the United Kingdom such as Mark Bray, Michael Crossley and Terra Sprague, but which has extended to involve writers from the small states of the Commonwealth and beyond: David Atchoarena, Godfrey Baldacchino, Charles J. Farrugia and Didacus Jules, to name a few.

Originally a rather positivist approach was adopted with a population cut off point of 1.5 million or perhaps 2 million as the 'rule of thumb' for classifying small states. This was hotly contested because of its arbitrariness. Different definitions and conceptualisations, mainly from a constructivist framework, were therefore proposed, relativising smallness in the process. Much depends on the relational aspect of smallness. Small in relation to whom and what? The Czech Republic, for instance, would consider itself a small state in relation to neighbouring Germany as would Austria, even though the latter was the seat of an empire whose colonies were all in Europe. As Derek Sayer writes in *Prague: Crossroads of Europe* (2018, p. 173), "The Czechs like to think of themselves as a small nation, and small nations, as Milan Kundera points out, 'see their existence perpetually threatened or called into question; for their very existence *is* a question' ". Sounds familiar?

Smallness became more a matter of an 'imagined community' and collective perception; and of being in a peripheral situation with respect to the territory marked by the concentration of formal power structures. It entailed the positioning of one territory or people in relation to others. In this regard, some even promoted the idea of small jurisdictions. Under this rubric, smallness is not confined to statehood but also includes territories. This impacted on the ways we look at education in terms of reaching out and looking in, connecting with the world and at the same time safeguarding that which is perceived as 'local' or indigenous. So the range of material on offer regarding small states became ever more complex, especially with regard to education and the dialectic between the global and the local, or the regional and national with respect to that which comes across as 'connected with a specific territory or group of people'; more so within situations characterised by tensions between national sense of 'identity' and group autonomy. Thus, for example, Indigenous people (the Maori) are perceived as a 'nation within a nation' in New Zealand, having their own non-formal education settings vis-a-vis the more Pakeha-dominated formal educational system.

The complexity of and 'takes' on varieties of conceptions concerning education in small states are deftly captured in this policy-oriented book. 'States within states' feature in chapters on Croatia and Kosovo, themselves regarded as small states which, in the case of the former, punch above their weight (e.g. third place in 1998 and second in 2018 in the men's Football World Cup Finals). Of course, Croatia's notion of smallness is again relative to other countries alongside the Adriatic or to the former Yugoslavia. Within its own conception of 'smallness' we find minorities, as in Kosovo, who connect with a larger country, Serbia, but who are a small minority in the country of abode. Ethnic minorities insist on having their own curriculum

in a context where identity matters and is contested. This invites parallels with another former Yugoslav county, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where one comes across three parliaments and three history curricula.

The book under review also includes a chapter on the favelas in Brazil. They are presented as small enclaves or territories existing in larger cities: in this specific case, Rio de Janeiro. The ‘vulnerability’ issue, so common in most of the literature on small states, comes to the fore in this and other chapters, despite the editors’ strictures against this recurring theme. Yet as Godfrey Baldacchino has argued time and time again, small states have their strengths, turning what appears *prima facie* to be a weak situation into an asset: dealing with the unexpected and adapting easily, living by one’s wits, thinking laterally as Edward De Bono would say, himself from a small island state (Malta). Resilience, straddling borders and improvisation, as well as flexible specialisation and multi-functionality can, when carried out adroitly, be regarded as strengths. How does one explain situations where and when some small states with little resources, save for sun and sea, having lost strategic naval importance, develop vibrant, buoyant economies?

Then we have centralisation and the presence of strong states, as in Singapore, seriously calling into question the Western mantra that effective educational systems emerge from situations governed by the free market. This is a current widespread neoliberal development myth driven by countries whose own education systems were built on the backs of a strong state, as Andy Green argues in his *Education as State Formation* (2013 edition). Singapore is an example that gives the lie to the Western development mantra. Its education system was predicated on the existence of a strong, albeit, for some, authoritarian (same party in power since 1959), state. No wonder, as Welsh and Banerjee argue in this book, this relatively small state, an educational hub, is engaged in lending and showcasing its policies to larger states, not least the UK, and not simply borrowing from them.

The same applies to countries hemmed in within a mountainous range such as Bhutan, with its promotion of the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Its educational policy is discussed in the context of the fluid two-way system of appropriating and promoting ideas. The role of single persons engaged in educational policies cannot be underestimated: in small states, single education officers wield considerable influence on the development of study areas, unlike their many counterparts in larger states. Ideas that capture their imagination figure in their conceptualisation of the area for which they are responsible; often, these ideas are conveyed to them through their participation at conferences and study visits abroad. What Farrugia and Attard (1989) have called *The multifunctional administrator* can synthesise ideas from different areas falling within their remit, providing interesting and original concoctions wedded to local realities. As they are also products of their own surroundings, they adopt an approach involving ‘reinvention’, perceived as a strength. This nuances any borrowed concepts. This is especially true of Bhutan which has been projecting its own policy notions abroad, capturing the attention of people from larger nations. The GNH policy concept has rendered Bhutan a magnet for educators and other policy makers seeking new pathways to pursue, and it connects with the work of larger institutions. Given Matthew J. Schuelka’s revealing account of educational policy making in Bhutan, I would envisage the UN or UNESCO promoting this type of policy discourse (the GNH), with its strong environmental dimension, in its SDG literature and other related material.

Small state policy makers and writers of ‘policy fidelity’ documents tread a fine line when at their most skilful, between connectivity with larger trendy discourses and re-adaptation to ‘local’ communal experiences, as indicated time and time again in this book. They combine languages, one providing connectivity with the global and one that appeals to local concerns;

a sort of bilingual and bicultural policy skill-set. Policy travels through different domains experiencing transmutations in the process. This applies to large states with their regional differences and to small states, or clusters of small states, with their own variations. Lifelong Learning might be the broader international concept to which people latch on; but the meaning it takes, when developed in different contexts, might turn out to be a far cry from what would have been decided in, say, Brussels, Washington DC or Canberra. This has resonance with some of the countries featuring in the book's case studies: some (e.g. Luxembourg) at the juncture between two cultural forces (Germany and France); while others (e.g. Bangladesh, Malta and Mauritius) with a clear colonial history and impact that also makes its presence felt in neo-colonial ways. The cases of technologically mediated language – in action in teacher education in Bangladesh and language issues in Mauritius – are particularly interesting.

All this complexity is brought to bear on educational policy making in small states. The areas covered in the book are many, from Higher Education to schooling to specific areas such as Early Childhood Education, co-authored by Godfrey and Anna Baldacchino. In the ECE chapter, the colonial British influence on Malta and Barbados can be felt, despite the fact that any transposition of culture, including any aspect of education, from one place to the other, involves changes and often positive changes at that. The recipients of this cultural transfer (people from a small territory or group) make this culture connect with a whole new way of life, enriching the culture and its concepts, rather than 'cheapening' or 'adulterating' it, to reproduce TS Eliot's words criticised by Raymond Williams in *Culture and society* (1958/1962).

One recurring point, in this book and others, is that many of the issues faced by small states are not necessarily unique to them vis-à-vis larger states. For example, the multi-functional roles (including educational roles) of a curator in a National Museum in Cyprus or Bhutan, conditioned by scale, are similar to those of a curator of community museums in, say, small localities in the USA, Canada or the UK, as scale is often an important factor in these small contexts. Furthermore, as notes Didacus Jules, the headache of an ant is as annoying as that of an elephant. In many cases however, the issues/situations are writ large in the small state. This state plays its cards, with regard to smallness, according to the way the game develops. It can play 'big' when necessary (as with Maltese Prime Minister Dom Mintoff using the unanimity card, at the Helsinki 1975 Security and Cooperation in Europe Conference, to influence global agendas). It can also play 'small' when the situation warrants this: such as claiming 'exceptionality', as Cetta Mainwaring has written, with regard to the alleged crisis of migration in the small states of the Mediterranean.

Many of the above points are found in this book. Admittedly, some chapters, such as the one on the Rio favelas by Rolf Straubhaar, might come across as a bit of a stretch. They take us away, however, from the fixed and arbitrary notion of smallness provided in the early Commonwealth literature, especially on education, rendering the whole idea of smallness what it effectively is – a construct – characterised by its fluidity and multi-varied nature which makes the field appear that bit more exciting, albeit rather vague to some.

Mention of the invasion of Grenada in the opening chapter (p. 26), said to have reinforced the idea of vulnerability, brings to mind an area of small state education I find intriguing: the notion of revolutionary education in small states. The cases of popular education in Grenada, under the Maurice Bishop government, and in São Tomé e Príncipe, written about by Paulo Freire, come to mind. What is it about revolutionary popular education and literacy that small states in the throes of revolution or independence can offer? Grenada literacy workers, for instance, contributed to revolutionary literacy on the Atlantic strip of a larger

central American country, Nicaragua, something about which Didacus Jules has written. All this connects with the favelas chapter. Is there any nuanced notion of Freirean and other revolutionary pedagogy that has emerged from these small enclaves within Brazil? Are they simply receptive to the kind of US imperialist 'soft politics' making its way through Evangelical religious sessions? Are there any interesting fusions that arise from possible crosscurrents involved? This is a question I would also pose to the authors of the Luxembourg chapter (Graff and Tröhler), given the country's location and its skills and other educational and training opportunities at the interface between German and French models.

One final question: We have come across the idea of multipurpose learning settings, developed in Trinidad & Tobago and written about by Didacus Jules, but given short shrift in this volume. This concept of an all-age multipurpose educational institution or school is born out of the small scale condition: one is encouraged to make multifunctional use of resources for cost effectiveness: after all, duplication costs more *per capita* in small states than in larger ones. Would this idea be also congenial to larger contexts to make maximum and less costly use of resources; in short, a small territory idea gaining wider international resonance?

All in all, this is a very interesting compendium which adds to the growing literature in the field. It comprises many case studies but also fine comparative approaches such as those concerning: Barbados and Malta; Jamaica and Malaysia; Singapore, Jamaica and Britain; Croatia and Kosovo. As we are told at the outset, comparative studies involving small states and non-sovereign territories are at a premium in this area of research. This is one of the welcome additions that this book brings to the field. It falls within the purview of Comparative and International Education, as many of the references throughout suggest.

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