

century has exerted great pressure on states of all sizes to create international regimes that promote two basic values—openness and predictability—to reduce impediments to the flow of goods and services. State-controlled education and training systems will have to recognize that teaching/learning does not stop at their borders. The drive for competitiveness has made nation states respond to globalization in various ways, but two principal measures have been the restructuring of work and an increased focus on achievement, measured by national evaluation tests. In this context, it is important to note the centrality of the state in the political thinking and lives of the people. Despite being ‘victims’ of globalization, it is clear from this book that people in small states view education as an inviolable right. People will be reluctant therefore to accept major moves towards openness if it means sacrificing the ability of the state to provide certain services/entitlements within their borders.

JOHN MINNIS

Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Education, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Examination Systems in Small States: comparative perspectives on policies, models and operations

MARK BRAY & LUCY STEWARD (Eds), 1998

London, The Commonwealth Secretariat

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The contemporary world is becoming increasingly global and integrated; yet, paradoxically, the same world is one where smallness—in terms of viable economic and organisational units, cultural identities or politically autonomous jurisdictions—is also becoming more the norm than the exception. These diametrically opposing tendencies for fission and fusion are clearly interrelated: they belie a concern to ‘think global while acting local’; they are witnesses of a strategy—or a destiny—to play on an international platform which subjects all that is local to a scrutiny which could summarily reject tradition and difference as parochial or anachronistic. In contrast to what is internationally convertible, the local stands out so much more sharply. Deliberate policy decisions may need to be taken, in order to conserve, upgrade, modernise or otherwise to replace such stark departures from the global standard.

Idiosyncratic negotiators of this tussle between local and global are the world’s smallest states and territories. Some may be considered as the world’s earliest exponents of global villages, having been created by colonialism; imbued by Christian religion; speakers of European languages. Their ‘receptor orientation’ and ‘dependency inclination’ renders them automatic consumers of global cultural artefacts and enthusiastic mimics of external role models. Even economic development policies are often not addressed towards the enhancement of endogenous productive capacity but intended rather to consolidate the linkages of these small territories with sites of external largesse.

Innate resource poverty exacerbates the inevitability to depend and consume the foreign. But a head-over-heels dismantling of local attributes in favour of the prized alien has its limits and costs. Small states are, after all, *states* and therefore have a real concern in establishing national institutions operating in line with espoused national interests and development goals. Thus, to mention a few examples, national languages or dialects are not discarded in educational programmes in preference to languages of international currency; human resource strategies seek to boost the skill repertoire of the national labour force and not merely provide passports to enable the skilled to qualify for emigration; and school curricula are intended to generate an appreciation and understanding of local physical and human features, and are not meant to present syllabi of irrelevance, condoned and sanctioned just because they happen to be metropolitan.

The policies, models and operations of examination systems in small states and territories are a clear example of such a ‘localisation’: a contested terrain between global pressures and local identities. International convertibility is critical for microstate citizens keen to maintain and strengthen their links with the outside world; a widely recognised qualification can be the crucial umbilical cord enabling a transposition—permanent, seasonal or temporary—for oneself and/or one’s kin to improve one’s economic prospects and quality of life. It is also a powerful status good, and a highly prized one where status goods are few and far between. Having examinations administered by a prestigious college or university abroad also helps to dismiss accusations of impropriety, clientelism or unprofessional behaviour—not easily silenced in a jurisdiction where everybody knows everybody else ... including the examination paper setters and markers.

Nevertheless, various small states and territories have successfully gone beyond what might appear to be structural constraints and today operate a variety of home-based, administrative units to run their examinations. The responsibility has been entrusted to local ministries of education, autonomous local syndicates, regional examination councils and, in rare instances, national universities. This set-up allows them to stem foreign

exchange payments to external institutions which had been administering their examinations; develop the technical and professional expertise necessary to administer such an important exercise; and, perhaps more importantly, start developing indigenously relevant curricula.

Indeed, examination systems can serve as very powerful agencies of socialisation or societal transformation. They emit signals to an often captured clientele which can ill afford to neglect the tone and substance of curricula when all important certification is at stake. The signals are also typically beyond contestation, unlike political exhortations or ideological pronouncements which are democratically expected to generate salutary social debate, if not outright disagreement. No wonder then that governments are prone to look at examination systems as suitable and attractive policy instruments, and not simply as devices for credentialling competences, sifting and selecting candidates for higher education or better paying jobs, or else influencing the likelihood of emigration.

The text edited by Mark Bray and Lucy Steward is an excellent and timely compendium of how a variety of small states are coping with this delicate balancing act: juggling the imperative of national goals and priorities on the one hand and the external marketability and currency of educational standards on the other. A series of ten national case studies, obviously structured according to strict and predetermined editorial guidelines, illustrate the histories, challenges and outcome of specific policies of examination management, with specific reference to those held at the end of the secondary school cycle. These chapters are supported with relevant statistical data and are often spiced with real life episodes which render the arguments so much more salient. Some problems here may not have been adequately discussed—such as the burning issues of equivalence and standards—yet the authors make a sufficiently clean breast of their small-scale predicament, something not easily done when one is the very object of one's own critical gaze. This rich and original case study material is sandwiched between eight other chapters—three exploring regional examinations bodies, two dedicated to metropolitan examination boards and the last three being more explicitly analytic pieces, locating the discussion within the wider literature on small states and suggesting plausible policy directions.

The text is one of the few publications exploring examination systems from a comparative perspective. It also joins the growing set of books commissioned and published by the Commonwealth Secretariat which recognises that smallness is not intrinsically boon or bane but rather comes along with a particular 'ecology'. This, therefore, warrants a carefully distinct outlook and methodology. The Commonwealth Secretariat remains one of the few bodies today with a sustained track record of concern with the predicament of the world's small territories.

GODFREY BALDACCHINO
University of Malta

Opportunity Foregone—Education in Brazil

NANCY BIRDSALL & RICHARD H. SABOT (Eds), 1996

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pp. 300

Brazil's educational performance is poor in comparison to that of developing countries in a similar economic situation. The authors of this work attribute educational problems in Brazil mainly to the prevailing social and economic problems, among them Brazil's unequal income distribution, inward-looking development strategy, and a power structure dominated by private interests.

The troubled condition of Brazil's educational system may put at risk the sustainability of Brazil's successful economic reform. There is evidence that education can foster economic growth. Analyses in this publication show that education makes a difference where wages are concerned. The increase in years of education are estimated to increase the economic output. However, the large variation in the rate of return to schooling which exists across industries in Brazil may give rise to ever increasing inequality. In view of this risk, and considering the low educational expansion in these two last decades, the authors in this work recommend an increase in the size of the educational system.

The quality of education, a major consideration in educational literature, especially in developing countries, is also a concern in this publication. Differences in the quality of public and private schools may influence the pass or drop-out rate of students. Contradicting accepted knowledge for Brazil, the authors in this work show that, in certain regions of Brazil, drop-out rates are higher among students who succeed in moving to a higher class than among those who have to repeat a year, and that there is no conclusive evidence that a better quality school for poor students leads to much improvement in students' achievements. Clearly, these findings deserve

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