

Acknowledging the importance of context: Researching education in small states

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The distinctive features of small states provide the focus for this special issue. Each paper explores issues of global significance that relate to curriculum and pedagogical reform, language and literacy policies, internationalising teacher education and research partnerships. Whilst small states are the context for the discussion of these issues, the papers offer insights that have wider application. Acknowledging the contextual features of small states can help elucidate the significance of multi-layered contextual factors in educational reform, and the ways in which global agendas have been mediated locally.

INTRODUCTION

This special issue explores educational initiatives across a diverse range of small states: the landlocked nation of Bhutan; the archipelago of the Maldives; the relatively new nation of Timor-Leste; and the Pacific nations of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Whilst these nations have distinctive characteristics they all fit the categorisation of a ‘small state’ using the Commonwealth’s definition of states that have a population of less than 1.5 million. As with any categorisation or label, it delineates, and as such, hides as much as it reveals. The six articles that comprise this special issue represent diverse contexts with a broad scope of geographic, political, economic and educational features. The articles, therefore, reveal the differences as well as the similarities of the ‘small state’ focus. Their distinctive agendas, priorities and challenges, do, however, emphasise ‘a keen appreciation of the significance of context’ and the need to do more to acknowledge the influence and impact of contextual factors and issues (Crossley, 2010, p. 422). Aligned with Crossley’s view, this special issue explores the questions of *how small states engage with international agendas while dealing with their own set of circumstances, needs and priorities* and, simultaneously *how international researchers and practitioners engage in small states in ways that enable appreciation of context*.

The characteristics of small states demonstrate why contextual factors are so important, as their distinguishing characteristics mean they also face unique challenges. Furthermore, due to their size, small states tend to be outward looking and consequently tend to be policy importers (Brock & Crossley, 2013). Consequently borrowed policies need to be contextualised to suit their conditions and circumstances, highlighting how one size does not fit all and how what can be ‘best practice in one context may not be appropriate elsewhere’ (Crossley & Sprague, 2012, p. 35). Where policy borrowing has been successful it is because significant elements are shaped and incorporated within models of practice appropriate for the host culture (Elliott, 2014, p. 39).

This special issue seeks to generate discussion about: (i) contextualised understandings of ‘best practice’ and developing contextually appropriate approaches to education

reform; (ii) the role of education research in elucidating the tensions between global and local knowledge and perspectives; (iii) what larger states can learn from research in small states.

Each paper explores educational issues of global significance such as: language and literacy reform; navigating conflicting policy demands; promoting student wellbeing; implementing learner-centred pedagogy; the enduring effects of colonial legacies; internationalising teacher education; and the challenges of curriculum reform. In each case, there is emphasis on how global agendas are navigated locally.

In a contribution to this special issue Michael Crossley provides an overview of the formal acknowledgement of the needs of small states, outlining key developments since the 1980s. He has long drawn attention to particular ecology of small states (Crossley, 2010), which is a central theme in this issue. He articulates the need for contextual sensitivity in educational research globally and articulates the contribution that small states can make to the international community.

In different ways the various papers generate insights about how context matters – within culturally, socially and geographically diverse small states. The first two papers address reform at the school level and how this intersects within the wider system and policy environment. The second set of papers explores education initiatives through investigations centred on system level reform or multi-site studies, highlighting the multiple factors that are negotiated in this process. Exploring broader reflections on colonial influences and research collaboration in a small state context is the underpinning theme for the final paper.

Engaging at a local school level, Rhonda Di Biase explores the intersection of policy and practice in one island school within the highly-dispersed nation of the Maldives. This school is framed as a ‘resilient school’ in setting itself against the national trend and the problematic implementation of active learning reform within the Maldives. The school posed particular interest in its approach of going against the dominant narrative of widespread challenges of changing classroom practices in Maldivian classrooms. Therefore, the study provides insights into how this school negotiated to enact innovation within the Maldivian policy context. The study concludes with a series of design principles, providing insights for others intending to promote innovation and reform in related contexts.

Sangay Jamtsho’s study is situated in Bhutan, a landlocked small state. He illuminates the intersecting and sometimes contradictory pressures that exist as Bhutanese schools navigate competing demands in seeking to promote a whole-school approach to student well-being. This focus on student well-being can be understood within the context of Bhutan’s 2009 promotion of Gross National Happiness. Yet even in this context, conflicting pressures were identified as a barrier to reform. The need to embrace a shared meaning for change was highlighted as a necessary precondition for being able to promote student well-being in Bhutanese schools.

In taking up the idea of developing a shared vision, Rebecca Jesson and Rebecca Spratt report on a research practice partnership focused on enacting and studying the idea of co-designing literacy interventions in the Pacific Literacy and School Leadership Programme, which is funded under the New Zealand Aid Programme in three Pacific nations. The need for acknowledging the central place of context in aid assistance is explored not only for the purposes of promoting local voice and through that ownership

and sustainability, but also as an inevitable consequence of the theoretical frameworks that underpin learning.

Acknowledging the challenges in Timor-Leste and the specific needs this country has faced arising from its colonial past and its newly acquired independence, Laura Ogden investigates the tensions inherent in the new curriculum that aims simultaneously to internationalise and localise the new curriculum. The complex agenda of curriculum reform and the divergent visions of education make for a challenging reform process as tensions between global education policy and the localisation of national reform are navigated. These tensions are openly acknowledged and elaborated in this paper.

Renata Cinelli and Mellita Jones, tapping into the outward looking orientation of small states, explore the experience of Australian students in completing a practical teaching experience in the Solomon Islands. The ‘openness’ of many small states often results in longstanding relationships with larger, neighbouring states. With many students completing their teacher education studies outside of their home countries, this study has wider implications for teacher education in general. Their study also highlights the importance of highly personalised relationships in small states, evident in the longevity of this practicum relationship and the development of longstanding relationships between the institutions.

The final paper takes a step back, reflecting upon context from a broader perspective. Alex McCormick considers research agendas and related issues of ethics ownership and uses of knowledge, situated within decolonising discourses. Using the Vanuatu research moratorium as an opportunity for reflection, she considers the cultural, demographic, geographical, historical, linguistic, political and (post-) colonial features of this small state, and explores the complexities of collaborative investigations and knowledge production and sharing.

This issue, highlights the importance of recognising the influence of contextual factors in educational reform. While small states, may have distinctive needs and priorities, ‘smallness’ also has some advantages (Crossley & Sprague, 2012). It has the potential to illuminate the factors influencing education initiatives. What can be rendered more visible in a small state, or even a small island, has the potential to offer insights into larger questions. The implementation failure of many internationally driven educational initiatives (Crossley, 2010) focuses attention on the disparity between what is intended in policy and what happens in practice. As such, Brock and Crossley’s (2013) contention that research on education in small states can help better understand and appreciate the significance of multi-layered contextual factors in educational reform provides an overarching focus. The degree of ‘openness’ or outward orientation of small states, which is explored through the research reported in this special issue, elaborates different approaches in how global agendas have been mediated locally.

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