

Large questions faced by education at the sharp end in SIDS

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Abstract: The paper reflects upon thirty years of collective experience relating to educational and environmental development in small states worldwide. Particular attention is given to what the international community can learn from the distinctive experience of small island developing states (SIDS), and how this relates to the big questions and contemporary global challenges faced worldwide. In doing so, insights from local experience, decolonial perspectives, and indigenous knowledges are highlighted for a multidisciplinary and international readership.

Keywords: climate change, context sensitivity, educational development, environmental uncertainty, Maldives, research partnerships, SIDS, small island developing states

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Introduction

This contribution to the special issue draws upon thirty years of experience gained by the *Education in Small States Research Group* (ESSRG) that was set up in 1994 at the University of Bristol, in the United Kingdom. The ESSRG now operates as a professional and academic network of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in, and engaged with, small states worldwide. Two of the authors are in the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, and two are based in Bristol. We have worldwide institutional and individual participation of well over 100 members, long term partners in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and the South Pacific, and a well-established online seminar series and website (www.smallstates.net).

Education, context sensitivity, and Small Island Developing States

Work on education in small states complements much of the work carried out in other fields and disciplines, including political science, where Veenendaal and Corbett (2015, p. 549) argued a decade ago that they “... have shown that systematically overlooking two of the most

successful regions in terms of democratization – the Pacific and the Caribbean – greatly distorts our understanding of the causes and stimuli of transition and consolidation”.

In the field of education, and with reference to our own work in comparative and international education (CIE), we have long argued that the distinctive experience of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) continues to be overlooked by the international community (www.smallstates.net). In doing so, our research suggests that studying SIDS helps to highlight the importance of context in understanding how educational policy and practice often need to be more closely related to distinctive historical, cultural, and environmental priorities and challenges. While mainstream comparative research has demonstrated how this is the case worldwide, the small state experience magnifies the significance of such factors, and in doing so draws sharp attention to new dimensions of policy transfer theory, and to this ‘large question’ that is central to ongoing work on global educational reform.

Crossley and Sprague (2017) explore such issues with particular regard to related theoretical and conceptual implications. As Crossley has repeatedly argued, “context matters more than many policymakers, and some researchers, realise...” (2019, p. 7); and this has significant implications for researchers across the social sciences who are challenging the global implementation of “one size fits all” international goals, targets, and agendas.

This is well demonstrated within the Maldives, where Shiyama (2020, p. 360) argues that when working in this context, it is important that the researcher be familiar with the local socio-cultural and historical context to understand how Western-based school pedagogies and related theories could be adapted and modified within rigid formalistic school curricula. Thus, she argues that:

in researching into LMIC and SIDS contexts, local researchers must play a key role because their involvement allows access to valuable, contextually situated knowledge enabling significant insights that are much richer than that which an external researcher may be able to tap into.

Additionally, Muna (2014) argues that in Higher Education, an area that is often neglected in SIDS research, the Maldives experience of developing its higher education system demonstrates the need for partnerships and regional alliances to mitigate the limited resources available within SIDS. Such an approach not only enabled the development of a robust higher education system in the country but also ensured that Islamic values were embedded in higher education curricula. In doing so, the challenge of “operating small institutions in contexts of scarce human resources” (Bray, 2016, p. 8) can be addressed, while being respectful of the contextual sensitivities and unique identities of the country.

Education, climate change and environmental uncertainty

Our related work on education and environmental uncertainty in SIDS also draws attention to the big global questions relating to climate change, with SIDS being at what we have called ‘the sharp end’ of environmental uncertainty, experiencing existential climate challenges (Crossley and Louisy, 2019). In the Maldives, for example, a sea level rise of two metres would lead to national inundation, as would be the case for Tuvalu in Oceania. These issues are explored in an ESSRG Video prepared for COP26 held in Glasgow in 2021 (see “SIDS Speak to COP26”, 2021, <https://youtu.be/Mn2U9hUQXVc>). In this video our research teams in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific present interviews with a wide diversity of stakeholders, and especially local “grass roots” community members, who reflect upon the implications of environmental uncertainty for education policy and practice, the potential of indigenous knowledge, and their own distinctive understandings of the nature,

impact, and challenges of climate change. These insights are contrasted with the high-level positions and policy trajectories adopted at the global leadership level. Indeed, the video reminds us that it was the voices from SIDS that introduced the evocative phrase “1.5 to stay alive” into the international discourse on climate change. As such, the Maldives 2018 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) made ambitious plans to reduce 26% of CO₂ emissions by 2030, aiming to achieve net zero by 2030, with relevant international support and partnerships (Ministry of Environment and Energy, 2018). SIDS may be at what we have called the ‘sharp end’ of environmental uncertainty but, in this complex and often contested international arena, they can increasingly be seen to be leading and inspiring critical debates relating to some of the largest questions and contemporary global challenges of all.

Decolonial perspectives and conclusions

Together, the arguments raised above contribute to what is currently one of the biggest issues being faced across the social sciences: the contemporary decolonial debate. This has implications for educational and social theory, policy, and practice worldwide; for cultural representation in curricula; for language in learning; for pedagogic theory; and for greater diversity and equity at all levels of education worldwide. It is also a debate that has a distinguished history of critical scholarship within SIDS, and perhaps most notably within Oceania (Crossley and Sprague, 2014). International scholars are, for example, increasingly engaging with Epeli Hauofa’s (1993) seminal critique of development theory within his Tongan homeland and across the Oceania. Indeed, his 1993 call for “our sea of islands” to be recognised as “large ocean states” challenges the very concept of “small island states” and continues to inspire a new generation of Pacific scholars across the social science and humanities (Koya, 2024; Lagi, 2014). This research on the larger questions faced by education and environmental uncertainty worldwide is important and therefore deserves a far wider readership, well beyond Oceania and Small Island Developing States.

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