

Educational priorities in Asian and European small states

A focus on Brunei Darussalam, Maldives, Cyprus and Malta

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Introduction

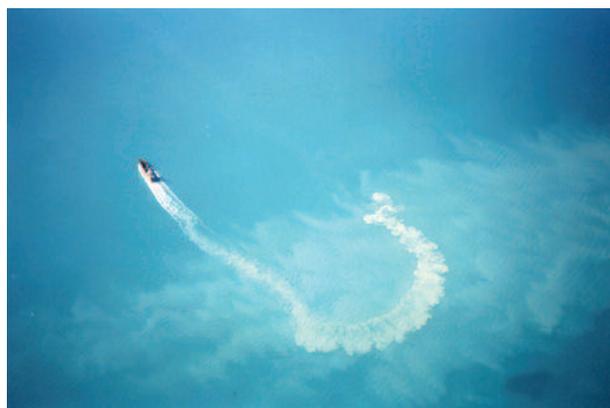
For appropriate interventions, whether at global, regional or national level, small states should not be seen simply as scaled-down versions of larger states. It must be recognised that they possess an ecology of their own, which requires local and specific insight. The Commonwealth has a considerable history of having represented the interests, and given prominence to the concerns, of its small state members. With regards to education, the Commonwealth Secretariat has played a leading role among international agencies in identifying distinctive features of education in small states from the mid-1980s onwards.

Work on the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol and recognition of teacher qualifications addresses issues of teacher migration and mobility that disproportionately affect small states. The development of work on multi-grade teaching and on boys' underachievement also has a focus on and application to the contexts of small states. The Commonwealth Secretariat intervention in the area of education is driven by Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) deliberations and recommendations, which in turn reflect member states' needs and priorities and other emerging education issues and trends at the regional and international level. The most recent consultation on small states' priorities, and last in a series, was held in Brunei Darussalam in December 2010.

Diversity and parallels

The meeting in Brunei Darussalam created an opportunity to bring together small states from two relatively distinct world regions – Brunei Darussalam and Maldives, and Cyprus and Malta. As the discussions proceeded, it became apparent that there are in fact many commonalities shared by these four small states – such as size of populations, educational models and the number of teachers. For example, Brunei Darussalam (approximately 400,000 people), Malta (414,000) and Maldives (300,000) have roughly similar population sizes. Meanwhile, Brunei Darussalam (US\$30,391 in 2006) and Cyprus (US\$31,410 in 2008) have about the same gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. Most importantly, in terms of common challenges and problems, as well as educational priorities, there are many commonalities in all four of the small states.

The reform programmes too in Brunei Darussalam, Cyprus and Malta share many similarities, the foremost of which is to develop



an education system that will prepare students for the twenty-first century. Malta, for example, enacted a New Education Act in 2006, where the key objectives are raising the attainment rate of post-secondary level education and reducing the number of early school leavers. And given that all four states are developing their education system to meet such needs, there is a necessity to move towards more formative and continuous assessment for students and teachers, as well as for curricula and management models.

Teaching quality and leadership

There was extensive discussion on what is the optimal way to select (and retain) teachers. Malta has instituted a practicum or compulsory two-year induction course before awarding a permanent warrant. Prospective teachers are given an internship and training for two years and their performance is evaluated before they can be confirmed as teachers. Student teachers are also required to maintain a professional portfolio during their initial four-year training course. To ensure high quality teaching, Malta is also planning to introduce a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme for teachers.

The four states have different needs when it comes to CPD programmes. For example, Maldives has a particularly urgent need to develop expertise in creating a Department of Examinations, as well as capacity-building for curriculum development. In addition, the country has made a request for assistance in developing human capacity in science and maths education, as well as training in e-technology. At present, most teachers in Maldives need additional training, as 30 per cent do not have a pre-graduate diploma in education or higher. To address this challenge, the state is

implementing a teacher registration policy, which will require a CPD programme to help teachers meet the minimum qualifications necessary to continue in the profession.

Related to teacher quality is school leadership. School leadership is not just about management; it also requires an understanding of assessment and curriculum development. All four states mentioned that this is a key priority area. Cyprus, for example, noted that there is a need for training programmes for school leaders as well as programmes that will lead to extra qualifications for promotion. Brunei Darussalam has implemented a new salary scheme, including a 'master teacher' programme to attract quality teachers who will become pedagogical leaders. And since Maldives has not conducted any training programmes for school leaders during the last 15 years, it acknowledges that there is a need for CPD programmes in this area.

Early childhood; science and maths

The meeting agreed that the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Millennium Development Goal (MDG) has been realised in the four states, and they are working towards achieving the other Education for All (EFA) targets. All four have invested significant resources and focus in developing early childhood care and education. For example, Cyprus has one year of compulsory pre-primary education, which is free in the public sector. Malta has two years free pre-primary education, although at present this is not compulsory. In Malta's National Curriculum Review, early childhood education is on par with the primary and secondary cycles. Brunei Darussalam is in the process of developing a national comprehensive plan for pre-primary education. In the country's Vision 2035, investing in early childhood education is one, and the first, of eight educational strategies. Maldives has pre-primary education for a significant proportion of the population; a challenge, however, is to expand access and to train teachers in this specialism.

Some participants indicated science and maths to be an area of concern. Brunei Darussalam, for example, mentioned that a greater percentage of students need to take up science and maths education. In Malta, a working group has been established to develop a national science education strategy, which aims to strengthen science teaching at primary and secondary levels, to ensure science literacy for all and encourage more students to study science at postgraduate level. At present, with funding from the European Union, all science laboratories in Malta have been upgraded in the state sector. For Cyprus, the issue in this area concerns gender, as too few girls are choosing science as a subject, and there is a need to increase the rate of participation of girls in science and maths education. Maldives faces a severe shortage of science teachers and at present science as a subject is not being comprehensively offered at upper secondary levels. For Maldives, there is scope for providing teacher training in science, as well as building infrastructure for science education, such as laboratories and ancillary facilities.

Conclusion: learning beyond school

The four states agreed that the teaching of life skills is very important, but is not taught adequately in schools at present. Some participants mentioned that they are shifting the emphasis to a more holistic education, including participation in sports, getting involved in community service and experiencing different cultures. In Malta, while the 'fundamentals must prevail', there is a move towards more broad-based education, with an emphasis on engendering lifelong learning. Brunei Darussalam, in its curriculum reforms, also puts emphasis on real world 'experiential' learning, including project work and field trips. In Maldives, other than content knowledge, there is also a focus on teaching 'soft skills' such as communications and assertiveness. Cyprus places importance on multicultural education as well, in view of the rising numbers of foreign students in schools.

Crossley, Bray and Packer's 2011 Commonwealth research study (see discussion in this volume) confirms that small states are international and outward looking. While this is partly inherent and driven by circumstance, it can also be a conscious policy choice – and hence within the reach of all states, large and small.

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For more information on the consultation, a full report is available from ComSec publications, co-authored with Professor Chee- Kiong Tong, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.