The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives Vol. 17, No. 4, 2018, pp. 27-35.
https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/IEJ

Accessibility to schooling on small islands: An exploratory study of local options and opportunities on Kangaroo Island, South Australia*

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Families living on small islands face limited options for the school education of their children. This exploratory study on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, considers some of the issues they face and the choices they make. It is based on informal, semi-structured interviews with parents, grandparents and children. Results show that all informants want students to be successful at school, gaining the life-skills, knowledge, and maturity to succeed in vocational or university education, and obtaining satisfying employment. While some believe that schooling on the Island is inadequate for achieving these goals, they also recognize the unique benefits of living on the Island. They, therefore, want the best of both worlds: education that equips their children for success in a global world, along with a deep grounding in local values, including the interdependence that exists within and between extended families, and the sense of security and belonging their children gain from family and community networks. Most families we interviewed believe they have been able to achieve a functional syncretism between the global and the local, albeit in a variety of different ways.

Keywords: isolated schools; small island schools; accessibility to education

INTRODUCTION

The challenges of accessing effective school education on small islands are often considered within the broader framework of remote and isolated education, especially in Australia where outlying schools are more likely to be separated by desert than water. Research in this area, however, has tended to focus on teacher recruitment and retention, and more generally on service delivery (e.g., Downes & Roberts, 2017; Drummond & Halsey, 2013; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015). Little attention has been given to the challenges faced by parents and children. Yet families living in remote settings, including small islands, face a range of issues when evaluating options for the school education of their

* *An earlier version of this paper was presented at the XIV ISISA Islands of the World Conference, Lesvos, Greece, 24 May 2016*

children. There may be only one school, often with multi-grade classes, administered by a central bureaucracy with limited knowledge of local conditions.

Based on their research in Western Australia, Wildy & Clarke (2009; 2012) identified several of the key challenges confronting parents and children in such contexts. First, they posit an assumption of deficit in remote schools. This can derive not only from the central bureaucracy and the teaching staff but also from the local community; that is, there is a general culture of acceptance by families in remote and isolated communities that their children will perform less well than those in metropolitan schools. Mediocrity is often the accepted norm. These expectations are confirmed by research that consistently shows students in such communities having lower performance on PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests of literacy and numeracy (Sullivan, Perry, & McConney, 2013).

A second challenge arises from teacher recruitment and retention. Put simply, small school staffing profiles are seldom conducive to achieving the full potential of students (Wildy & Clarke, 2012). Roberts (2014a), writing from an Australian perspective, highlights the problems of attracting and retaining quality staff:

> Unfortunately, rural schools experience a persistent turnover of staff, staff shortages, an inappropriate number of newly-qualified staff, fewer experienced staff to act as mentors, and a lack of staff in specialist subject areas. (p. 136)

Add to this the fact that children in multi-grade classes in small schools may have the same teacher for two or three years, or more, thereby posing a dilemma for parents if that teacher is not effective in nurturing the learning of their child. With limited staff and financial resources in small schools, there is also the issue of lack of access to the range of extra-curricular activities that are normally available in metropolitan schools.

A third challenge identified by Wildy & Clarke (2012) is more subtle: the cultural dissonance that can occur between teaching staff and the community. The norms, values, beliefs and behaviours evident in the local community may be quite different to those of the leaders and teachers in the school, and little understood by them. Roberts (2014a, p. 143) suggests that school leaders and teachers are likely to bring with them the "metro-centric assumptions" of the education bureaucracy, assumptions that are based on "a scientistic-technical view of education that ignores the situated enactment of all effective learning". Roberts (2014a) continues:

> [A]n approach used in one school in a metropolitan centre, or a highly effective teacher in a metropolitan centre, are not necessarily applicable in another context, such as a rural or remote school. (p. 143)

Roberts (2014a) then introduces the concept of "localism", suggesting that a school policy structure that allows local flexibility and reinterpretation is appropriate in many remote and isolated settings. He refers to this as "place-conscious" education, arguing for "spatial justice" in the provision of education in remote schools (Roberts, 2014b). By this he means that the school curriculum should be driven by the needs of local communities, defined in their own terms. This is a controversial suggestion, given that the Australian Government recently has developed a new, standardized, national curriculum (Brennan, 2011). There is an inherent tension between the localism advocated by Roberts, and the national focus inherent in the new curriculum. As Roberts (2014b) himself expresses it:

> The tacit implication... that the same knowledge is necessary and desirable for all students fails to recognise that place renders some kinds of knowledge more valuable and useful than others. Consequently, rural student dis-engagement and under-achievement can often be a function of a perceived lack of relevance or due recognition of the nature and value of place-based knowledge. (p. 51)

This idea of tension between the local and the national in the delivery of education has a parallel in the visionary UNESCO report, *Learning: The treasure within* (Delors et al., 1996), that identifies a series of tensions underlying most current educational policy and planning, including the tension between the local and the global. Writing from a Pacific perspective, Teasdale (2005) identifies the tension between the local and the global as one of the key challenges facing educators in the small island nations of Oceania. He believes this tension need not be dysfunctional. Rather, he argues for a dynamic syncretism between the local and the global that enables young people to grow up with the skills and confidence to live successfully in a globalizing world, while still maintaining a clear sense of their own local cultural identity (Puamau & Teasdale, 2007). A similar syncretism may well be achievable between the localism and nationalism described by Roberts.

Certainly, local norms and values need not be antithetical to the effective delivery of education in isolated schools. Williams-Diehm et al. (2014), for example, writing from a US perspective, argue that they are assets that need to be explicitly nurtured by educators. They cite several positive cultural characteristics of small, local communities that can benefit the school: the strong interrelationships that exist within and between extended families; the sense of security, safety and belonging that children derive from close family and community networks; and the interdependence of isolated communities that encourages people to pull together, especially in supporting the school and the children who attend it. Corbett (2015) likewise refers to the resilience of small communities, and to the embeddedness of schools within their communities.

Undoubtedly there are also negative cultural characteristics in isolated local communities that can thwart the work of educators, such as: lack of motivation to change/improve; the exclusivity of sub-cultural groups (e.g., sporting, religious) and rivalries between them; acceptance of mediocrity; and the influence of social networks of power and influence.

In light of the above, what can parents on small islands do to facilitate effective learning for their children at school? How can they ensure that their children grow up with the skills and knowledge to live successfully in a rapidly globalizing world? These are certainly questions that exercise the minds of many parents on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, questions that we have sought to address in an exploratory study of accessibility to education, and the choices available to parents and their children.

THE KANGAROO ISLAND STUDY

Kangaroo Island is a relatively large and diverse island geographically, with an area in excess of 4,400 square kilometres, yet is small in terms of population, having only about 4,400 permanent residents; that is, there is an average distribution of just one person per square kilometre. Almost 40% of Kangaroo Island comprises national and conservation parks. The remainder is mainly farmland, with cereal crops, sheep grazing and timber predominating. There are also several small, “boutique” rural industries, including

production of wine, honey, marron, olives, eucalyptus oil, and seafood. The economy is almost equally based on farming and tourism, the latter accounting for approximately 200,000 visitors per year.

There is one main township on the Island with a population of about 2,000, and three smaller townships, each with about 200 to 250 residents. There is only one school. Its main campus is in Kingscote (445 students) with smaller campuses in Parndana (145 students) and Penneshaw (75 students). Multi-grade classes are the norm, especially at the two smaller campuses. Families have little or no choice of who teaches their children. Some children may be taught by the same teacher for two or three years.

The school is a government facility administered by the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development. It has a fleet of buses that provides transport for students from outlying areas. Most senior secondary education (Years 10 to 12) is provided only in Kingscote, resulting in some senior students having a one-and-a-half hour commute each way to attend school. Opportunities for curriculum specialization are quite limited, especially in the senior years, notwithstanding the provision of some courses via distance education through the Adelaide Open Access College, and the availability of vocational training courses in specific areas, including civil construction, tourism, agriculture and business studies.

This study of accessibility to education has been carried out quite independently of the school. We have been looking from the outside in. The focus has been on parents and grandparents, and on the children themselves. What are the options and opportunities available to them? What are the key challenges they face in relation to schooling, and how do they resolve them? In order to address these questions, we chose an exploratory approach using informal, semi-structured interviews (Delamont & Jones, 2012). Participants were identified via our own social networks. Having lived permanently on the Island for almost a decade and having immersed ourselves in a range of different community groups, our networks are extensive and varied. As the study proceeded participants referred us to other families outside our networks.

We made a deliberate decision to keep interviews low key and informal. Many of the interviews were opportunistic; that is, we talked with people when and where we met them: in the main street; at local coffee shops; at the supermarket; on the ferry going to the mainland; at sporting and cultural events; and at the Sunday farmers' markets. We talked with others in the course of our commercial or professional interactions with them, and others again by telephone. Our naturalistic approach to interviewing was deliberate. We wanted our research to reflect the everyday social relationships of the Island, where people are comfortable, relaxed, and engaged. We were careful to assure participants that any information they provided would be treated confidentially. And we were careful to record the salient features of each discussion as soon as possible afterwards.

We found that families fell into at least four categories:

- Those that had made a deliberate decision to keep their children at the local school for the full 12 years of schooling;
- Those that had decided to send their children off the Island for all or part of their secondary school education, generally to boarding schools in the state capital of Adelaide;

- Those with younger children who were still grappling with decisions about the educational choices available to them; and
- Those whose financial circumstances gave them no choice but to keep their children on the Island for the duration of their school years.

We also discovered a few families that had made more radical choices:

- To home school their children; or
- To move the whole family to the mainland so their children could attend larger schools in a metropolitan centre.

Our data indicate that most parents give careful consideration to the options available to them, and that the extended family, including grandparents, and often the children themselves, are involved in discussions and decision-making. Central to these discussions is the question of finance. Any option other than remaining at the local school involves added expenditure for families. Even the option of home schooling requires at least one parent to forfeit opportunities for wage earning in order to educate the children. In some cases, it is the grandparents who agree to dip into their retirement savings and/or investments to fund the costs of off-island education. In other cases, children are able to win scholarships via a competitive examination and assessment process thereby reducing tuition and/or boarding expenses. Families living in the most remote parts of the Island are eligible for support from the Australian Government through its *Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme.* The scheme provides a boarding allowance of up to A$9,548 per child per year to facilitate attendance at schools on the mainland. Regardless of the source of funding, however, mainland schooling invariably involves financial sacrifice for families, and decisions about when, where and how to arrange it can be complex and challenging:

***When*:** Few parents can afford to send their children to mainland schools for the full six years of secondary education. Nor do many parents want to break up the family when children are still in their pre-teen or early teenage years. Typically, most families opt for the final three years of secondary school (Years 10 to 12). There have been at least two recent exceptions to this when children have won valuable scholarships covering all six years of secondary schooling.

***Where*:** Almost invariably, those opting for off-Island schooling send their children to the state capital of Adelaide, and generally to non-government schools. There is a wide range of options, from prestigious, high-fee schools with a strong emphasis on academic excellence, to relatively low-fee institutions, generally affiliated with a particular Christian denomination or educational philosophy. A small number of children attend government schools, including specialist schools that offer intensive curriculums in areas such as science, mathematics or music.

***How*:** A major challenge is the cost of travel and accommodation. Fortunately, there is an efficient coach/ferry service between Adelaide and the Island, allowing children to return home during holidays and mid-term breaks at relatively low cost. For most children, travel time is less than four hours each way. Accommodation is the big challenge. Most of the prestigious, high-fee schools have boarding houses that provide intensive care and supervision, albeit at a significant cost. Otherwise families need to arrange for children

to board with family or friends, or make arrangements through social networks, such as those affiliated with Christian churches.

In at least two recent cases, families have opted to move to the mainland for the duration of their children's secondary schooling, partly to avoid breaking up the family, partly for financial reasons (i.e., they see it as a cheaper option than sending children on their own). This has meant leasing or selling the family home on the Island and moving themselves and their possessions to accommodation close to the school(s) the children will attend. Such moves only appear feasible when at least one parent has the qualifications to find suitable employment in the new context or can transfer from their current position within the same employing entity.

Why do families make the sacrifice to send their children to the mainland for secondary schooling, or to uproot the entire family and move off the Island? The primary reason, cited by almost all interviewees, is to provide children with greater academic, social and sporting opportunities. From an academic perspective, parents believe their children will receive better quality teaching, greater choice of subject areas, opportunities to specialize in subject areas not available on the Island, and a stronger foundation for entry into university and subsequent employment. Socially, many parents commented on the need for their children to be part of a student cohort that values education and aspires to excellence. In some cases, parents also want their children to have opportunities to participate in a wider range of competitive sports, and a greater challenge to excel in them.

In a small number of cases, decisions about off-Island secondary education are dictated by family tradition. There are extended families that have been on the Island for several generations, having built up successful business or farming enterprises. Some of these families have well established links with particular non-government schools in Adelaide. Right from birth, there is an assumption that children will follow in the footsteps of parents and grandparents in attending these schools, and that grandparents may provide some financial assistance. An underlying but little articulated factor here is the social prestige or presumed social capital accruing from attendance at a particular school, and the potential employment and business opportunities that might flow from this in later life.

There were a number of other reasons mentioned by interviewees for sending children to mainland schools. These included: the impact and inconvenience of the very long daily commute to and from Kingscote; a belief that non-government schools in Adelaide manage adolescent behaviour and special learning needs more effectively; the variable quality of teaching on the Island, and an acceptance of mediocrity in some instances; concerns about peer pressure on the Island, especially in the context of alcohol, drugs. and sexual mores; non-government schools being perceived to be more supportive of the family's values; and the need for children to experience a larger social network and different ways of thinking.

Interestingly, a number of parents whose children had moved to Adelaide for upper secondary schooling emphasized the need for them to maintain their local cultural and friendship networks on the Island and went to considerable expense and inconvenience to bring them back to the Island regularly, especially to participate in competitive sports. In a few cases, older teenagers returned to the Island almost every weekend during winter

to play in their local sporting team. In response to further questioning, these parents talked of the need for their sons and daughters to gain a world-standard education while still maintaining the deeper values of their local community, values emphasizing loyalty, interconnectedness and mutual support. Overall, most families were happy with the schooling decisions they had made, and believed their children were getting the best of both worlds.

As noted earlier, financial considerations are central to family decision-making, and for many families the option of off-Island schooling is simply not a reality: family income and investments are insufficient, nor is extended family support available. However, we did speak with a number of families that could afford off-Island schooling but chose to keep their children at the local school. None of these families had made the decision lightly. The reasons for doing so were varied:

- Their children are happy on the Island, have well established social networks, enjoy the marine environment (sailing, fishing, swimming), and participate successfully in weekend sporting teams;
- Some parents are school teachers and believe they can provide additional learning and academic enrichment at home;
- On principle the parents have made a decision to live locally, use local services, including the local school, and are committed to supporting the local community, including the school, through volunteering;
- One small nuclear family (two parents; two children) values the close-knit nature of their relationship, stating: *We're all four deeply committed to keeping the family together and weathering the positives and negatives of local education*;
- Parents with one child accept her strong preference to stay on the Island because of youth leadership opportunities, and the value she places on her social networks;
- Two parents who work in the public sector expressed a strong philosophical commitment to supporting government education services and keeping their children in the local school;
- Some families value the opportunities for their children to gain work experience on the Island, either in family-owned businesses or farms, or in local supermarkets, restaurants and coffee shops, believing this helps develop independence, initiative and a sense of personal responsibility;
- Many parents also commented on their strong wish to keep the family together during the formative adolescent years, aiming to give their children the resilience to cope successfully with post-school education on the mainland.

There was one common theme to almost all of our conversations with families that could afford off-Island education but chose otherwise: the perceived social and cultural benefits of Island life. These include: the interdependence and mutual support that characterises social relationships; the sense of security, belonging and personal well-being that children derive from extended family and friendship networks; the greater resilience and maturity that children acquire from living in remote settings; and, in some cases, the opportunity for children to learn to live in a more environmentally responsible way. Families

genuinely believe that these benefits outweigh any perceived disadvantages of local schooling. As one child expressed it: *Life is good on the Island. Why move?*

Many of the parents also seek to create opportunities for children to gain life-broadening experiences away from the Island. School holidays offer scope for family holidays in major Australian cities, or even overseas; one family embarked on a twelve month around-Australia camping trip immediately prior to their children beginning secondary school; other families arranged short- or longer-term overseas student exchanges for their children. Sport also provides opportunities, with children attending coaching clinics, training workshops and tournaments of various kinds in Adelaide or beyond.

CONCLUSION

Families living on Kangaroo Island face a range of issues when evaluating options for the school education of their children. All of the parents and grandparents with whom we spoke want their children to be successful at school, to gain the life-skills, knowledge and maturity to succeed in vocational or university education, and to obtain satisfying employment. Many feel that schooling on the Island is inadequate for achieving these goals. Yet, at the same time, they recognize the unique benefits for their children of living on the Island. They want the best of both worlds: education that equips their children for success in a global world, along with a deep grounding in local values, including the interdependence that exists within and between extended families, and the sense of security and belonging their children gain from family and community networks.

The essential challenge for families is to achieve a functional balance, or syncretism, between these two worlds, the global, and the local. In our exploratory study we found that families approach this challenge in a variety of ways. Some opt for off-Island schooling, especially at senior secondary level. Others make a deliberate decision to keep their children on the Island, but to provide learning support and life-broadening experiences. In either case there are significant issues to resolve. There are no easy answers. Yet many of the families in our study, regardless of the options they have chosen, believe it is possible to achieve a satisfactory resolution. Our study therefore adds credence to the idea that tension between the local and the global in the delivery of education (Delors et al., 1996) need not be dysfunctional, but that a dynamic syncretism can be achieved. Certainly, many young people on Kangaroo Island appear to be growing up with the knowledge and confidence to live successfully in a globalizing world, while still maintaining a clear sense of their own local Islander identity and values.

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