

## **Case-study of how an island school contributes to communal sustainability, viability and vitality**

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### **Introduction**

While island studies have played an important role in the history of science, few island studies have focused on the role played by small primary schools on offshore islands. The research area is hampered because there is no agreed definition of a 'small primary school'. Consolidation policies build on and give rise to certain myths. Demographic trends and rationalization principles put increasing pressure on national, regional and local authorities to make choices about school size policies. To the fore in these considerations are various diseconomic and disbenefit arguments pertaining to the retention of small primary schools. There is a wide range of school closing scenarios. In Norway and Sweden, due to the geographical dispersion of the population, policy makers have accepted that in maintaining communities in sparsely populated areas higher costs associated with maintaining education in rural and remote areas are inevitable and acceptable, while Iceland views schooling in rural areas as a national responsibility. There is little information available about pupil outcomes in small multi-grade classes in the Irish context. Benefits and costs of consolidation are usually distributed unequally among pupils, teachers, parents and the wider community. In reaching any sort of balanced assessment of the implications of school consolidation it is fundamental to consider the various outcomes of this distribution. Small schools are frequently objected to on the grounds of viability, being unable to provide an adequate curriculum, being socially disadvantageous in limiting opportunities for peer-grouping and social interactions and by being generally inefficient. While smaller schools face economies of scale there is evidence that small size yields some achievement advantages. How does a small island school promote the participation and engagement of families and the community?

### **Setting the context**

In a House of Commons Debate on the 14th of September, 1886, Mr. Deasy, the member for Mayo West, asked the Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, "whether the Reverend J. Quinn, Parish Priest of Clare Island, County Mayo, has made an application for an increase of the loan sanctioned by the Board of Works for the building of school houses in his parish?". Mayo was a part of Ireland that experienced severe deprivation during the Irish famine (1845 – 1852). One local newspaper, The Roscommon Journal, in July 1854, described the situation in Mayo subsequent to the famine. At that stage remaining tenants were being evicted, including from Clare Island, and large tracts of land in County Mayo were being bought up. "In the revolution of property changes, the new purchaser accelerates the departure of the aborigines of the country, by which he seems to imagine he has not only rid himself of their burden but enhanced the value of his property" (quoted in Derby, 2000). Rates of population decrease on offshore islands were extreme (see Table 1, below). By the time of the parliamentary debate in 1886, the population of Clare Island had been depleted by about 50%, but two schools were built, including the school that is the focus of the present study.

### **Goal of this study**

The present study examines the role played by the single primary school on one of Ireland's 11 offshore islands that still house a functioning school. While a process of "learning and leaving" is not an uncommon island experience, some studies have suggested that small rural schools can have integrative benefits for the local community helping to promote local vibrancy and community viability when working in partnership with local leaders and residents. In this descriptive case-study vulnerability mapping is used to expose threats to the island school. The dynamics of diaspora (dis)engagement and (dis)affection are examined through the *curricula vitae* of alumni. It is argued that the modern diaspora,

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based on its capabilities, historical experiences and present realities is uniquely different from the diaspora of earlier generations. How the island school promotes and nurtures local memories and histories is explored through the example of the schoolchildren’s annual Christmas concert.

Demographic drivers such as birth rates and ageing population are examined in the context of the case-study. The island experience is presented as an example of the ‘new mosaic of rural regions’ in Europe, where communal sustainability, viability and vitality often hinges on the attractiveness of a particular rural living space. While perceived “attractive” environments may drive in-migration, the absence of a primary school would diminish the attractiveness an island as a place for young families. The symbolic capital of island life is also examined. Headship, local management and multi-grade teaching challenges are explored.

### Mapping Social Vulnerability

A vulnerability map seeks to locate “sites where people, the natural environment or property are at risk due to a potentially catastrophic event that could result in death, injury, pollution or other destruction” (p. 3, Edwards, Gustafsson, & Näslund-Landenmark, 2007). Social vulnerability mapping refers to the identification of population characteristics that influence the social burdens of risks (Cutter, 2013). It is a moot point at what stage any population decrease ought to be considered as a special vulnerability. Social vulnerability is balanced by a community’s capacity for resilience. The mechanics of the process of population decline are laid bare in the demographic histories of small offshore islands.

The demographic characteristics, over the half century from 1961 to 2011, of the 11 Irish offshore islands that today have functioning schools (2015), are shown in Table 1. The general trend reveals a 33% reduction in total population numbers. The population of Ireland, in many ways, is unique in a European context. The population of the island of Ireland is still, today, considerably less than it was in 1841. In the early 1960’s, the population decline that had been going on for almost 120 years was halted, and has been increasing since then. This has not been the experience on offshore islands.

	1961	1966	1971	1979	1981	1986	1991	1996	2002	2006	2011
Bear Island	382	306	288	258	252	230	216	212	207	187	216
Cape Clear	235	217	192	155	164	145	132	145	129	125	124
Sherkin	101	92	82	82	70	87	93	98	129	106	114
Tory	264	243	273	213	208	136	119	169	133	142	144
Aranmore	948	847	773	825	803	735	596	602	543	522	514
Inishmaan	357	342	319	237	238	236	216	191	187	154	157
Inisheer	358	345	313	257	239	255	270	274	262	247	249
Inishmore	933	925	864	883	891	848	836	838	831	824	845
Inishbofin	248	247	236	203	195	177	181	200	178	199	160
Inishturk								83	72	58	53
Clare Island	205	167	168	132	127	140	137	136	127	136	168
<b>Total (excluding Turk)</b>	<b>4031</b>	<b>3731</b>	<b>3508</b>	<b>3245</b>	<b>3187</b>	<b>2989</b>	<b>2796</b>	<b>2865</b>	<b>2726</b>	<b>2642</b>	<b>2691</b>

**Table 1: Population trends on Irish offshore islands from 1961 to 2011**

### Marginality and Resurgence Trends

Table 1 is not entirely “red” (numbers in red refer to population decline between census periods and green to increases). The column for 2011 shows mainly “green” numbers. Seven of 11 islands showed small population increases. It is relevant to ask if these numbers are an indication of a resurgence trend. It is argued here that the key actor/entity in resilience capacity on any offshore island lies in the existence and role of the island school.

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In this context the concept of “offshore” is extremely important. The categorization of “degrees of geographic islandness” has been explored by Källgård (2005). He found one official count of Swedish islands, according to Statistics Sweden (2001) to be 221 800. The majority of these islands were less than 1,000m<sup>2</sup> in area (only 593 were larger). When the European Union counted the number of Swedish islands, according to their own definition, they came to the grand total of 24. This prompted Sweden’s National Rural Development Agency to count all islands, with an officially registered population, without any form of permanent link to the mainland. Their total was 576. However, the question remains as to how many of these islands are to be regarded as having a “viable community”.

Singh (et al., 2008), discussing the concept of a rural community in Australia, notes that communities of interest often “extend beyond defined spatial boundaries of particular localities”, and “are characterised by limited availability of services” (p. 466). They defined three categories of rural citizens: i) communities characterised by “lower incomes, higher levels of unemployment, fewer jobs and educational opportunities, higher levels of morbidity, reduced service access and support, and ongoing socio-demographic decline”; ii) “communities that live off farming and mining”; and iii) “professionals and retired people who choose the rural life as a lifestyle” and who “are generally affluent, retired, professionals or ‘hobby-farmers’”(ibid.).

Cross (1996) implications for population stability on Irish offshore island of service availability. He found little support for a hypothesis where recent population decline was related to islanders' perceptions of the adequacy of services nor between islanders' perceptions concerning population changes and quality of service (see Table 7). On the basis of his results, Cross (op.cit.) criticised an Irish Governmental interdepartmental co-ordinating committee for an inappropriate and oversimplified model of the circumstances of offshore islands.

Lyson (2005) has written an eloquent defence of rural schools:

“Schools in rural communities serve as a symbol of community autonomy, community vitality, community integration, personal control, personal and community tradition, and personal and community identity. Schools are places for sports, theatre, music, and other civic activities... Viable villages generally contain schools; dying and dead ones either lack them or do not have them for long. The capacity to maintain a school is a continuing indicator of a community’s well-being” (p. 49).

#### **Definition of “small” primary school**

In a recent analysis of from Ireland (Irish Department of Education and Skills, 2013) a small school was “taken to be one with less than 50 pupils enrolled”. The same study commented that there is no “agreed definition of what constitutes a ‘small school’” (ibid.) and went on to comment how parameters for size vary from country to country. Some examples were analyzed. In New Zealand, for instance, primary schools with less than 100 pupils are considered “small”, with the following riders: “smaller” schools were those with between 26 and 50 pupils, while “very small” were defined as those with less than 26 pupils. These numbers are matched in Scotland while in the UK, “very small” schools have less than 50 pupils (55 for Northern Ireland). In Sweden small rural schools have less than 50 pupils between 6 and 13 years old. USA has a higher threshold for “small”, while in Australia, upper boundaries for “small” vary between territories. Scotland has about 90 inhabited islands with low population densities. About 20% of Scottish schools have fewer than 50 pupils, a percentage matched by Ireland (op.cit.). About 15% of Irish primary schools have 50 pupils or less. Of the 582 schools with an enrollment under 50 pupils, 51 are located in Gaeltacht regions (8% of the total) and 13 are located on offshore islands, representing 2% of the total (of small primary schools). These are the schools which form the context of this paper.

#### **Population trends and school enrollments on Irish Offshore Islands**

Table 2, below, extends the time span of population decline from 50 to 170 years. The average decline is quite dramatic, averaging 77%. The green numbers in Table 1 are somewhat matched by the green numbers in Table 2, where 4 of the 11 islands experienced a population increase between 1996

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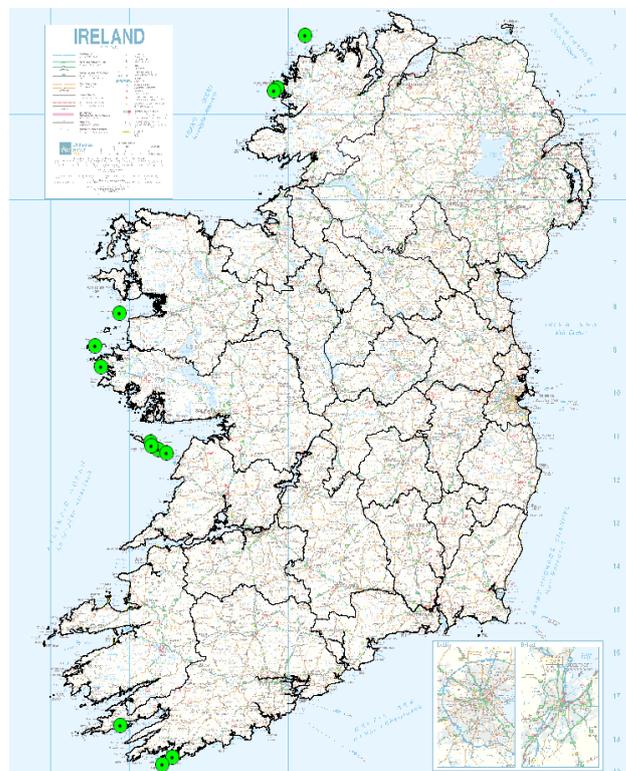
and 2011. The island that is the focus of this study, Clare Island, had the largest increase in population, in this period (25%), and the least decline in school enrollment (23%).

It is against this backdrop that the role of the school as a motor for community viability and vitality is examined.

County	Island	1841	1996	2011	% Change after 170 years	Population change 1996-2011	Population % change 1996-2011	Decrease in school enrollment 1992-2015
Cork	Bear Island	2122	212	<b>216</b>	-90%	+4	2%	NA
Cork	Cape Clear	1052	145	<b>124</b>	-88%	-21	14%	32%
Cork	Sherkin	1131	98	<b>114</b>	-90%	+16	16%	86%
Donegal	Tory	399	169	<b>144</b>	-64%	-25	15%	69%
Donegal	Arranmore	1415	602	<b>514</b>	-64%	-88	15%	45%
Galway	Inishmaan	472	191	<b>157</b>	-67%	-34	18%	58%
Galway	Inisheer	456	274	<b>249</b>	-45%	-25	9%	42%
Galway	Inishmore	2592	838	<b>845</b>	-67%	+7	7%	48%
Galway	Inishbofin	1404	200	<b>160</b>	-89%	-40	20%	45%
Mayo	Inishturk	577	83	<b>53</b>	-91%	-30	36%	86%
Mayo	Clare Island	1615	136	<b>168</b>	-90%	+32	25%	23%
Average population decrease 1841-2011					<b>77%</b>	Average decrease(1992-2015) <b>53%</b>		

**Table 2: Population and school enrollment trends compared for 11 offshore islands**

The geographic location of the 11 islands is shown in Figure 1 below. The purpose of showing their location is to emphasise the spatial challenges these islands face. They are comparatively isolated, are truly “offshore” and all face the Atlantic Ocean.



**Figure 1: The location of 11 offshore islands with schools off the coast of Ireland**

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The geographic location of these islands sets them apart, for instance, from Swedish, Finnish, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Danish, German and Dutch islands.

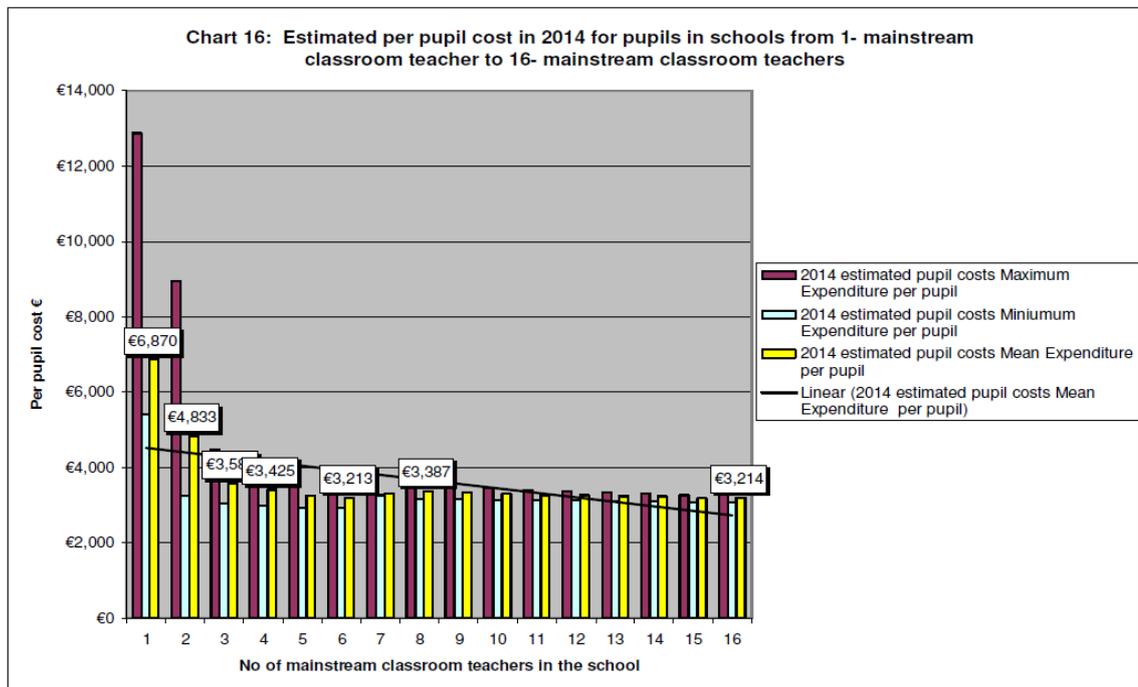
The remote location of Ireland’s offshore islands is the obvious explanation for the massive decline in population throughout the 170 year period. In the modern era, new social forces are exerting an influence that most likely differs from the forces at work 50, 100 or 150 years ago. The cost of providing services is one such factor. Costs for supporting small rural schools is one such factor.

**Consolidation Policies – Closure and Costs**

Policy-makers in Scotland introduced a presumption against the closure of rural schools, with the enactment of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. Closure and consolidation of small primary schools is a worldwide phenomenon, as are continuing debates in this regard.

The report on small school consolidation by the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2013) begins with an analysis of the role of small schools in the community concludes that “there is no clear-cut answer to the impact of reorganization of provision on the communities served by small primary schools”. The report comments that the body of research on school-community relationships is limited and continues:

“There is not a clear-cut relationship between the closure or opening of a school and community. On the one hand, it does not seem to automatically follow that closure will reduce sense of community – much depends on what else is there. On the other hand, opening of a new school does not guarantee sustaining sense of community because a new school could be required to cater for an influx of incomers and with that comes a dilution of the sense of community. Other jurisdictions with a high proportion of small schools do generally consider the community impact of a closure, among a range of other factors. These other jurisdictions which face similar challenges to Ireland in regard to school organisation are engaged in the process of reorganisation, with varying degrees of success” (op.cit., p.4)



**Table 3: Cost per pupil for schools with 1 to 16 teachers (taken from Irish Dept.Ed., 2013)**

Based on an analysis of the mean enrolment numbers, a general trend is evident of per pupil expenditure decreasing significantly from 1-mainstream classroom teacher (€6,870), to 2- mainstream

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classroom teacher (€4,833), to 3-mainstream classroom teacher (€3,582) to 4- mainstream classroom teacher schools (€3,425). The trend flattens from four mainstream classroom teacher schools and above. The estimated per-pupil operating cost of a 1-mainstream classroom teacher school (€6,870) is more than twice that of a pupil in a 16-teacher school (€3,214)

The Report from the Irish Department of Education (2013), in considering a range of reorganization and collaboration arrangements that have been implemented in other jurisdictions, identified three main reorganization strategies, increase the minimum viability thresholds, amalgamate schools, or establish some form federation between nearby schools.

The most recent data for enrollments in island schools is shown in Table 4 below.

County	School Name	Address	Total Boys	Total Girls	Total 2015	Total 1992	Decrease after 23 years
Cork	MHICHIL NAOFA	BERE ISLAND	11	7	<b>18</b>	NA	<b>NA</b>
Cork	S N CLEIRE	OILEAN CHLEIRE	4	9	<b>13</b>	19	<b>32%</b>
Cork	SHERKIN ISLAND N S	BALTIMORE	1	1	<b>2</b>	14	<b>86%</b>
Donegal	SCOIL NAOMH CHOLMCILLE	OILEAN THORAI	4	5	<b>9</b>	29	<b>69%</b>
Donegal	SN ARAINN MHOR II SN ARAINN MHOR I	ARAINN MHOR	8	7	<b>15</b>	26	<b>42%</b>
			12	13	<b>25</b>	48	<b>48%</b>
					<b>(40)</b>	<b>(74)</b>	<b>45%</b>
Galway	S N INIS MEADHOIN	ARAINN	3	5	<b>8</b>	19	<b>58%</b>
Galway	S N CAOMHAIN	INIS OIRTHIR	10	15	<b>25</b>	43	<b>42%</b>
Galway	S N EOIN POL II S N RONAIN	INIS MOR	16	5	<b>21</b>	NA	<b>NA</b>
			17	20	<b>37</b>	59	<b>37%</b>
Galway	INISHBOFIN N S	INISHBOFIN	5	6	<b>11</b>	20	<b>45%</b>
Mayo	ST COLUMBAS N.S.	INISHTURK	1	2	<b>3</b>	21	<b>86%</b>
Mayo	ST PATRICKS NS	CLARE ISLAND	9	11	<b>20</b>	26	<b>23%</b>
<b>Total enrollment in 13 island primary schools 2015</b>			<b>105</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>215</b>		
<b>Decrease in enrollment since 1992 (11 schools)</b>					<b>(168)</b>	<b>(324)</b>	<b>48%</b>

**Table 4: Latest enrollment (2015) and changes in enrollment since 1992 in 13 island schools**

The numbers in Table 4 can be compared with 91 schools in Ireland with less than 20 pupils (op.cit.) and 19 schools with 20 pupils (year 2009). St. Patrick's National School, Clare Island, is one of these twenty.

The new Irish State was established in 1922. At that time there were about 5,700 primary schools of which about 80% were one- or two-teacher schools. Amalgamation policies, begun in the 1960's, by the late 1970's had reduced this number by almost 40%, to 1,168 schools by the year 1979. A change in policy implemented about this time slowed the pace of amalgamation/consolidation. At the same time, these changes were being matched by two notable demographic events. Between 1841 and 1966 the population of Ireland had almost halved, to about 3 million and there was a continuing modern demographic shift/migration of people from marginal regions to the province of Leinster, to the east, a trend that continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Parents at a school-gate may not constitute a school-community relationship**

In conclusion there is not one simple answer to the key question posted at the outset, namely, "How would re-organisation of provision impact on the communities served by small primary schools?" It is clear from the consultations that the review generated a great deal of concern in communities. The report (op.cit.) comments that there is no clear-cut link between closing or opening a

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school and sense of community. “Parents congregating at a (school) gate does not necessarily constitute a school-community relationship” (p. 88).

An argument is put forward that it does not automatically follow that school closure would reduce any sense of community, arguing that it all depends on what else is in place. The report goes on, “opening of a new school does not guarantee sustaining sense of community because a new school could be required to cater for an influx of incomers and with that comes a dilution of the sense of community” (ibid.). The authors argue that because the available research is “limited to case studies”, this kind of data cannot be used to establish general conclusions. Finally, the report concludes:

“Substantial research is needed in this area. Other jurisdictions which face similar challenges to Ireland in regard to school organisation do consider the question of the community impact of closure, among a range of factors. These other jurisdictions are engaged in the reorganisation process, with varying degrees of success” (ibid.).

This is the challenge faced in this paper. This case-study of how an island school contributes to communal sustainability, viability and vitality is given as an argument.

### **School-community relationships**

In 1976, a conference entitled “The Ninth International Conference on Education in Sparsely Populated Areas, INTERSKOLA '76”, was held in Sweden. The main goal of the conference was to reach a better understanding of problems surrounding school policies. The main theme of the conference focused on the “School as an activating factor in natural life in sparsely populated areas.

Solstad (1994), in his Ph.D. thesis, described three categories of school-community relationships. He termed these: i) community-ignorant schools; ii) community-passive schools; and iii) community-active schools. Using these categories, Kalaoja and Pietarinen (2009) concluded that about half of Finland’s small rural schools could be judged to have reached the category ‘community-active schools’. On the basis of research data, Kalaoja and Pietarinen (op.cit.) concluded that the progress of societies, combined with educational policies, force municipalities to become part of a “continuing cycle of centralization”, which means that for most small rural primary schools exist on “extended time” (op.cit., p. 114). These schools are constantly challenged trying to “re-legitimate” (their term) their place in the Finnish school network. In their research review Kalaoja and Pietarinen (op.cit.) found an emphasis on the regional importance of small local schools, where village schools have been consciously nudged to partake in community development “by functioning as a hub for community activities” (p. 111). Schools are expected to function not only as social agents, supporting the social cohesion of village life, but also as a stimulus to encourage pupils to make responsible choices and to become action-oriented in helping to solve concrete problems within the local community. School-teachers are critical for the development of a curriculum that is locally orientated, where the whole school evolves to being a social nexus in the village.

While teachers often have lived in the community, sometimes even in the school building, Kalaoja and Pietarinen (op.cit.) comment that research has revealed an increasing trend for teachers to live in larger urban centres and to commute to their village schools, becoming only loosely linked into the local community. This is a risk that island schools are not subjected to.

### **Swedish Island Schools**

Sweden has about 400 inhabited islands, of which 291 (74%) have ten inhabitants or less (data from 2005). In 2006, Sweden had 39 schools on 33 small islands ranging in enrollment from 2 to 542 pupils. Eleven of these schools had a range in enrollment numbers from 2 to 19. About 3300 pupils were enrolled in 13 schools in the island municipality of Öckerö (population 2005= 12,682) located on 10 islands west of Gothenburg city. There are 10 schools, in size from 2 to 189 pupils, in the Stockholm skerries with a total of enrollment of about 430 pupils. In 2006, two of these schools had been “mothballed” (this is the formal term used for closed schools, which may be reopened in the future). The two mothballed schools are on two islands, both in the Stockholm Skerries, each with about 100

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permanent inhabitants. One of these islands, Sandhamn has about 1500 summer inhabitants and about 3000 day-trippers each day under the summer period (total annual visitor = 100,000). The other island, Nämndö, has a website where, under a link for “school”, information is given that the school, for the moment has been “mothballed” (the term used), with the following rider “beget some children”.

Why have some Swedish islands, with stable, or relatively stable populations been forced to “mothball” their schools. One reason is because they are experiencing the third category of rural citizenship described by Singh (et al., 2008) above where professionals and retired people are choosing a rural or island life as a lifestyle, because they most often are generally affluent, retired, professionals. Egelund and Laustsen (2006) have studied the consequences of school closures for small local communities in Denmark. Denmark has 27 small inhabited islands, of which 10 have island schools. From their narrative analysis, Egelund and Lautsten, after searching for themes in their interview protocols, were able to single out three typical closure scenarios. They termed these: the “lively local society”, the “dying local society”, and the “small island society” (op.cit.). They comment that when “a school closure takes place on an island it is in many ways the death-blow to the island community”. The causes are not complicated, dwindling population, caused by lack of employment on the island, being the end product of a development that, in spite of good intentions, had become impossible to halt (op.cit.).

These authors describe the “dying local society” thus:

“Even at the weekends there are few signs of life. There may be two young people with their mopeds near the village pond, outside the building that formerly housed the general store. Otherwise the predominant sign of life is the blue light in the houses emanating from television screens. CNN has come to the village, but community spirit has left.” (p. 436).

In contrast, the school in the “lively local society” serves other purposes where “most often schools are used as activity centres for the local population, sometimes with a special branch for the elderly, and often with the establishment of a nursery school” (p.435).

The stark question can be posed. How many, if any, of Ireland’s inhabited offshore islands might be described as “lively local societies” or “dying local societies”?

#### **The School as Community Hub**

In describing how the island school functions as the community hub in a lively local society, both authors wish to make it clear that their children have attended the school in question. Kelly is an in-migrant who has been a permanent resident for over 20 years. Gill has had a bifurcated habitation between the island and Sweden for more than 35 years.

Two of Gill’s research publications prove beyond any doubt that he does not view the island (or the school) with rose tinted glasses. This information is not unimportant because the reader would be correct in wondering over the possible risk that the authors are presenting gilded opinions and not robust results.

#### **Depletion/consolidation argument**

One critical piece of evidence is presented below. The photograph from 1992 shows those children that represent the school enrollment in the comparative year (1992 to 2015) for the calculation of decreases in enrollments over a 23 year period (shown in Table 4, above). Four of the children in the photograph now have children of their own in the school. Others are on the way. With seven grades, from infants to 6<sup>th</sup> class, enrollment replacement requires three babies to be born (or move to the island) each year.

Kelly has calculated information from the available roll books from St. Patrick’s National School, Clare Island. The enrollment from 1991/1992 is slightly different (N = 24) from the number recorded by the Department of Education (N= 26). This may indicate that the decline of 23% should be revised to 17%. This is only a minor adjustment. The key point is that the number would appear to be relatively stable.

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However, Table 5 reveals a much more important piece of data that relates directly to community viability. Dwyer (1963), with the help of the local parish priest recorded that in 1956 there were 14 families on the island that “were rearing families”, that is, with children under 18 years of age.

Year	Buachaillí (Boys)	Cailíní (Girls)	Total no. of Children	From total no. of Families
2015/16	9	11	20	13
2010/11	11	9	20	12
2006/7	12	5	17	10
2001/02	9	9	18	12
1996/97	9	11	20	10
1991/92	14	10	24	11
1986	Information not available			
1981				
1979				
1966				
<b>Table 5: Numbers from available school enrollment books</b>				

At this stage, 240 inhabitants were occupying 64 houses. The number of families with children in the school today is 13. About 60 houses are permanently occupied. The population is lower by about 80 inhabitants but, on the other hand, family size is lower.

The daily attendance books (not roll books) for September 1965 are shown in Table 6. The critical point of this little table is that it records a time when Clare Island had two national schools. This was the last record for St Brigid's School. The remainder of this book is blank because in 1965 the two schools were amalgamated. The curious thing about this piece of data is that it provides some evidence for the consolidation/amalgamation argument. The total number of school children, spread between two schools, was 17. Even if this number is an attendance record (some children may have been absent), it does show that the closure of one school has no negative impact on the community.

1965	Boys	Girls
St Brigids	3	4
St. Patricks	7	3

**Table 6: Attendance records for two Clare Island schools from 1965**

#### **Academic achievement argument**

The photograph in Figure 2 below is presented as evidence to rebut arguments about risks of lower academic achievement in small rural school. The photograph was taken in 1992, when two of Gill's three children were attending.

The photograph is chosen for no other reason than convenience, and that it was at hand as a scanned copy. It is more or less random and is taken to represent any photograph that might have been taken of the children attending the school throughout this period.

Little (2008) has made a research synthesis on the issue of school size and educational outcomes. She focusses on issues surrounding multi-grade (usually the classroom format in small schools) and mono-grade teaching. Results are ambivalent. Her conclusion is straight forward: “Considerably more research on the learning outcomes of multi-grade and monograde pedagogy is required” (p. 41).

Åberg-Bengtsson (2009) has studied the situation in Sweden. She concludes that, in regard to academic achievement, when background factors are controlled for, “there are no indications that education in the small rural schools is inferior to education in other schools” (p. 106). She also notes that there is a small body of academic research in the subject, but from the research that has been done:

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“the investigations point in the same direction: the small rural schools perform their obligations at least as well as other schools. One or two studies even suggest that rural children succeed better than their urban peers” (ibid.).

Table 7, where calculations are made for the subsequent academic achievements of the children in the photograph, proves this last point.



**Figure 2: Photograph of island schoolchildren from 1992 (2/4 children missing)**

Table 7 compares percentages of tertiary cycle academic achievement for European adults in the age group 25-34 with the achievements of the schoolchildren in the photograph.

	Short cycle tertiary	B.A.	M.A.	Ph.D.	Total
<b>Island School (n= 22, photo, 1992)</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>4% (n=1)</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Ireland</b>	12%	29%	9%	1%	51%
<b>United Kingdom</b>	8%	31%	10%	1%	49%
<b>Norway</b>	14%	22%	12%	0	49%
<b>Sweden</b>	10%	22%	13%	1%	46%
<b>Denmark</b>	4%	22%	15%	1%	42%
<b>OECD average</b>	7%	15%	14%	1%	41%
<b>EU21 average</b>	6%	12%	16%	1%	39%

**Table 7. Percentage of adults who have attained tertiary education, by type of programme aged 25-34,** taken from Table A1.3a: “Percentage of adults who have attained tertiary education, by type of programme and age group”, OECD (2015).

The conclusion is stark and dramatic. The island children are well educated. One child has completed a Ph.D, corresponding to 4,5% (1,6% is OECD average, 2012, representing an increase from 1% in 2000). However, a younger sibling of two children in the photograph received his Ph.D. in 2016 and another has been accepted for a Ph.D. programme.

**The ‘Glue’ that holds the community together**

A final piece in this jigsaw of community vitality and viability on an offshore island is represented by the final figure. Figure 3 shows school children from 2015 performing their annual Christmas concert in the community hall on the island. Both authors have attended many such communal gatherings. The event takes place in the dark of the winter, a time when raging seas and violent storms are frequent

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visitors. No single event that takes place on the island throughout the year receives such support and draws such an attendance at the Christmas Concert. The event is more than a concert, short plays and sketches are performed. Pupils recite, dance and sing. It is not unheard of for the amusements, with tea-break and pauses to extend over three and a half hours.



**Figure 3: Performers at the Christmas Concert, 2015**

The reader must not interpret this description of the event as neighbours turning out as a courtesy or duty. Every living inhabitant usually attends (including babies). Friends and family make a special journey from the mainland, because the entertainment is so good. One reason for this is because the audience will expect the teachers and pupils to be brazen and pertinent. Vignettes are enacted to record recent events, often both national and international and, of course, to reflect notable events on the island.

This island does represent a stable, vital element of the ‘new mosaic of rural regions’ in Europe. While communal sustainability, viability and vitality do hinge on the attractiveness of a particular living space, the presence of the local primary school is an essential part, a cog on which the whole machinery of rural sustainability rest. The school is at the very heart of the ‘local living society’ of young families. In the symbolic capital of island life, the school is the gold bar, the shared wealth which bears up the wider community. The vitality of this island exists symbiotically with the island school

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