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A CASE STUDY OF HOW AN IRISH ISLAND SCHOOL CONTRIBUTES TO COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY, VIABILITY AND VITALITY

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Abstract
Island studies have rarely focused on the role of small schools on offshore islands. Island schools are often impacted by the decisions of national, regional and local educational authorities, particularly in today's world where several arguments highlight the non-viability of small schools. Such schools are seen as unable to provide an adequate curriculum, socially disadvantageous and generally inefficient. This raises an important question: How does a small island school promote the participation and engagement of families and the community? This paper reports a bounded case to illustrate the characteristics intrinsic to a single small rural school as a communal hub on one of Ireland's Atlantic islands. A narrative about the school in past and present times, along with vulnerability mapping, is used to explore the social dynamics of the island school within its community. The findings show how the modern diaspora is different from that of earlier generations. The case also illustrates the differences in vulnerabilities between a perceived attractive environment, supported by a viable school potentially driving in-migration, and communities where the absence of a primary school or the risk of its closure would diminish the attractiveness of an island as a place for young families.

Keywords: small rural schools, communal viability, case study, social vulnerability

Introduction
While island studies, commonly referred to as Nissology (Baldacchino, 2006; McCall, 1994, 1996), have played an important role in the history of science, few studies have focused on the role played by small primary schools on offshore islands. The research field is hampered because there is no agreed definition for what a small primary school is. This article seeks to contribute to our understandings of small island schools and the benefits they bring to their local communities.

In a recent analysis from Ireland (Irish Department of Education and Skills, 2013), a small school was taken to be one with fewer than 50 pupils enrolled. The same study commented that there is "no one commonly agreed definition of what constitutes a small school" (p. 88) and it went on to comment how the parameters for size vary from country to country. In New Zealand, for instance, primary schools with fewer than 100 pupils are considered small, while "smaller" schools are those with between 26 and 50 pupils and "very small" schools have fewer than 26 pupils (p. 74). These numbers are matched in Scotland, while in Britain very small schools have fewer than 50 pupils (55 in Northern Ireland). In Sweden, small rural schools have fewer than 50 pupils between 6 and 13 years old. The USA has a higher threshold for small (up to 400 students for a small school in some locations), while in Australia, the upper boundaries for small vary amongst states and territories (Irish Department of Education and Skills, 2013, p. 75).

About 15% of Irish primary schools have 50 or fewer pupils. Of the 582 schools with an enrolment of under 50 pupils, 51 are located in Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) regions (8% of the total) and 14 are located on offshore islands, representing 2% of the total small primary schools. These are the

schools that form the context of this paper. Being both a small school and an island school is a set of circumstances that is often the focus of consolidation policies. Demographic trends and economic rationalisation principles increasingly put 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 schools.

Although there has been a wide range of school closing scenarios, this is not always the case. In Norway and Sweden, for example, due to the geographical dispersion of the population, policy makers have accepted that higher costs are associated with maintaining education in rural and remote areas and that these are inevitable and acceptable. Iceland views schooling in rural areas as a national responsibility. However, there is little information available about pupil outcomes in small multi-grade classes in the Irish context. The 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 non-viability, as they are unable to provide an adequate curriculum, are socially disadvantageous by limiting opportunities for peer grouping and social interactions, and are generally inefficient. While smaller schools face economies of scale, there is evidence that small size yields some achievement advantages. This raises the question: How does a small island school promote the participation and engagement of families and the community?

This article explores the situation regarding one island school off the Atlantic coast of Ireland. In the second half of the 19th century, the population decrease on Ireland's offshore islands was extreme. By 1886, the population of Clare Island had been depleted by about 50% (from 1601 inhabitants in the 1841 census), but two schools were built, including the school that is the focus of the present study. The article begins by highlighting the goals and design of the study and presenting demographic information about the populations of Ireland's islands and their school enrolments. Information about school closure policies and relevant literature relating to schools as community hubs are presented. The article then considers details of Clare Island's school and its relationship with and role in the community's viability and sustainability.

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 functioning schools. While a process of "learning and leaving" (Gillies, 2014, p. 19) 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.

Research design

The research design is a descriptive case study (Merriam, 2009), where the goal is to present a description of a phenomenon within its context (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). This design was selected because it focuses on a single unit or bounded system (Merriam 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). The boundedness is this case is partly the geographic imperative (islandness), the rural context and the size of the school. The purpose of a descriptive case study is to try to describe different characteristics of a phenomenon in a particular context, as a step toward theory building. Within this kind of case study, Baškarada (2014) suggests that "intrinsic case studies

only aim at acquiring better understanding of the particular case of interest" (p. 4) and that the case is "illustrative … and intended to add realism and in-depth examples" (p. 5). Following Yin (2013), qualitative and quantitative data describing the case of a small rural school on an offshore island have been searched for and found in documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations and physical artefacts. By using mixed methods (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003) with qualitative and quantitative data and multiple sources of evidence, construct validity will be strengthened by providing different perspectives on the same phenomenon.

The goal is to explore the particularity of the case by making arguments for the merits of the intrinsic case, because the case is of a particular research interest (Stake, 1995). Creswell and Poth (2017), echoing Stake, describe an intrinsic case study as one that arouses special interest "in and of itself and needs to be described and detailed" (p. 98). This strategy was adopted, for example, by Bradshaw (2015) to explore the intersections of a forest kindergarten school and a public school in Vermont, by Hulme Chambers, Tomnay, Clune and Roberts (2017) who used focus groups in their descriptive case study of the delivery of sex education at regional secondary schools in Australia, and by Martin (2005) who used a descriptive case study to illustrate how videoconferencing transformed the school experience of a special needs child in a small school on an island off the south-west coast of Ireland. Kimonen and Nevalainen (2002) used a similar strategy to study a process of active earning in a small Finnish rural school. In studying the effect of the No Child Left Behind initiative in the US, Twyman, Ketterlin-Geller, McCoyn and Tindal (2003) used a descriptive case study to delve into the effects of concept-based instruction on a culturally and linguistically diverse English language learning pupil in a rural school on the Pacific coast of Oregon.

Selecting the case for description should be based on a rationale and enough information ought to be available to present an in-depth picture. The boundaries of the case should be described within certain parameters, because the case is interesting in itself (Yin, 2013). The description offered here also uses vulnerability mapping (Edwards, Gustafsson, & Näslund-Landenmark, 2007) to uncover possible threats to the island school. The dynamics of diaspora (dis)engagement and (dis)affection are examined through narratives that come from the author's knowledge and experience of being a long-term island resident, as well as through the curricula vitae of alumni. These data are supported by other information, including photographs that have been sourced from residents, archival records from the school and from the Irish Department of Education, observations and the author's participation in various school events. It is argued that the modern diaspora, based on its capabilities, historical experiences and present realities, is different from the diaspora of earlier generations. How the island school promotes and nurtures local memories and histories is explored.

Demographic drivers, such as the number of families with school children, and historical population parameters are also examined. The island experience is presented as an example of the "new mosaic of rural regions" (Persson & Westholm, 1994, p. 409) in Europe, where communal sustainability, viability and vitality often hinge 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 of an island as a place for young families. The symbolic capital of island life is also examined.

The author, who has had a residence on the island since 1979, has maintained bifurcated habitation between the island and Sweden for almost 40 years, spending a part of each year in each place. He had been involved with the Co-op and various island initiatives while not neglecting his researcher's eye (Gill, 1994; Gill & Stenlund, 2006).

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" (Edwards et al., 2007, p. 3). 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.

On the offshore islands of Ireland, population decline has been evident over the past 170 years. The population decline in the island population from 1841 to 2011 is quite dramatic, averaging 77%. This is shown in Table 1. The remote location of Ireland's offshore islands is the obvious explanation for this massive decline in population. In the modern era, new social forces are exerting influences that most likely differ from the forces at work 50, 100 or 150 years ago. The cost of providing services is one such factor, as are costs for supporting small rural schools.

The demographic characteristics for the half-century from 1961 to 2011 of the 11 Irish offshore islands that still had functioning schools in 2015 are shown in Table 1. The general trend reveals a 33% reduction in total population numbers. Indeed, the population of Ireland, in many ways, is unique in a European context. The population of the island of Ireland (including Northern Ireland) is currently about 5.5 million, considerably less than it was in 1841 when the population was about 8.5 million (Crowley, Smyth, & Murphy, 2013). In the early 1960s, the national population decline, which had been ongoing for almost 120 years, was halted and the population has been increasing since then. However, this has not been the experience on all of the offshore islands.

Island communities	***1961***	***1966***	***1971***	***1979***	***1981***	***1986***	***1991***	***1996***	***2002***	***2006***	***2011***
Bere Island	382	306	288	258	252	230	216	212	207	187	216
Sherkin	101	92	82	82	70	87	93	98	129	106	114
Cape Clear	235	217	192	155	164	145	132	145	129	125	124
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
Clare Island	205	167	168	132	127	140	137	136	127	136	168
Inishturk								83	72	58	53
Totals (excluding Inishturk)	4031	3731	3508	3245	3187	2989	2796	2865	2726	2642	2691

Table 1: ***Population trends on Irish offshore islands from 1961 to*** **2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2011)**

As Table 1 indicates, the non-highlighted numbers show population declines between census periods. The numbers highlighted in green show population increases. The column for 2011 shows mainly green numbers. In fact, seven of the 11 islands showed small population increases, although 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, serving families with children of school-going age.

In this context, the concept of *offshore* is extremely important and the difference between an "officially registered population and permanent population can prove to be a major problem" (Källgård, 2005, pp. 295–296). Using the Swedish context, Källgård raised a question about how many existing islands can be regarded as having viable communities. Singh, Molla, Karanasios and Sargent (2008), when discussing the concept of rural community in Australia, noted 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:

1. Those living in 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";
2. Those living in "communities that live off farming and mining";
3. "Professionals and retired people who choose the rural life as a lifestyle" and who "are generally affluent, retired, professionals or 'hobby-farmers'." (Singh et al., 2008, p. 468)

Cross (1996) studied the implications of service availability for population stability on Irish offshore islands. He found little support for a hypothesis where recent population decline was related to islanders' perceptions of the adequacy of services. On the basis of his results, Cross 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)

Little (2008) has made a research synthesis on the issue of school size and educational outcomes. She focused on issues surrounding multi-grade (the usual classroom format in small schools) and mono-grade teaching. The results are ambivalent, although Little's conclusion is straightforward. She stated that "considerably more research on the learning outcomes of multi-grade and mono-grade pedagogy is required" (p. 41).

Åberg-Bengtsson (2009) has studied the situation in Sweden. She concluded 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 noted that there was a small body of academic research on the subject and that "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" (p. 106).

Consolidation policies: Closure and costs

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. It concludes that "there is no clear-cut answer to the impact of reorganisation of provision on the communities served by small primary schools" (p. 89). The report comments that the body of research on school-community relationships is limited:

> *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.* (p. 4)

The report from the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2013) also highlighted the costs of running small schools, particularly those with only one, two or three mainstream teachers. Based on an analysis of mean enrolment numbers, the per pupil expenditure decreased significantly from schools with only one mainstream classroom teacher (€6,870 per pupil), to two mainstream classroom teachers (€4,833 per pupil), to three mainstream classroom teachers (€3,582 per pupil). The estimated per pupil operating cost of a one mainstream teacher school (€6,870) is more than twice that in a 16 teacher school (€3,214).

In considering a range of reorganisation and collaboration arrangements that have been implemented in other jurisdictions, the report from the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2013) identified three main reorganisation strategies: increase the minimum viability thresholds, amalgamate schools, or establish some form of federation between nearby schools. These are all strategies that are unavailable for nine Irish islands (Aranmore and Inishmore each have two primary schools).

Table 2 shows statistics for enrolments in the island schools between 1992 and 2015, population trends between 1996 and 2011, and historical trends from the census of Ireland in 1841 (Central Statistics Office, 2011).

County	Island school	Total enrolment 2015			School enrolment decrease 1992–2015	Island population change 1996–2011	Historical change 170 years
		Boys	Girls	Total			
Cork	Bere Island	11	7	**18**	**NA**	+2%	-90%
Cork	Sherkin	1	1	**2**	**86%**	+16%	-90%
Cork	Cape Clear	4	9	**13**	**32%**	-14%	-88%
Donegal	Tory	4	5	**9**	**69%**	-15%	-64%
Donegal	Aranmore 1 Aranmore 2	8 12	7 13	**15** **25**	**42%** **48%**	-15%	-64%
Galway	Inishmaan	3	5	**8**	**58%**	-18%	-67%
Galway	Inisheer	10	15	**25**	**42%**	-9%	-45%
Galway	Inishmore 1 Inishmore 2	16 17	5 20	**21** **37**	**n/a** **37%**	+7%	-67%
Galway	Inishbofin	5	6	**11**	**45%**	-20%	-89%
Mayo	Clare Island	9	11	**20**	**23%**	+25%	-90%
Mayo	Inishturk	1	2	**3**	**86%**	-36%	-91%
Total enrolment		101	106	**207**	**52%**		-77%

Table 2. ***Population and school enrolment trends in 14 schools on 11 offshore islands***

As Table 2 shows, the total population of the islands has decreased by an average of 77% since 1841. The decrease since 1996 has not been as dramatic, as seven of the 11 islands averaged an 18% decrease. The other four islands, among them Clare Island, showed population increases of about 12%. Having regard to Källgård's (2005) comment in relation to the difficulty of defining a resident on an island, these figures should only be seen as trends.

The school enrolment numbers are more precise. The trend for the period from 1992 to 2015 is clear. All schools show a decrease in enrolment, averaging 55%, from over 300 children to about 200 in total. The vulnerability trends are complicated. Four schools have fewer than 10 children enrolled. One of these, on Sherkin island (2 children in the school), has shown the joint highest decrease (86%) of school enrolments while the island has had a 16% increase in population. This can be taken as evidence of the gentrification process (Clark, Johnson, Lundholm, & Malmberg, 2007). The other school, on Inishturk (with 3 children), is on an island with the highest overall decrease in population in the same period—36%. This is evidence of a struggling island community.

There is no one simple answer to the question of how a reorganisation of educational provision might impact on the communities served by small primary schools. It is clear from the consultations described in the review conducted by the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2013) that school closure considerations generate a great deal of concern in communities. This is starkly obvious in regards to island schools. The report comments that there is no clear cut link between closing or opening a school and sense of community. It states that "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, because it depends on what else is in place. The report argues that because the available research is "limited to case studies" (p. 88), these data cannot be used to establish general conclusions. Finally, the report concludes that "substantial research is needed in this area" (p. 88). This is the challenge faced in this paper. The multiple cases of

single, small schools on offshore islands lay bare the symbiosis between school and community. This case study of how an island school contributes to communal sustainability, viability and vitality is given as an argument.

Community relationships and the school as community hub

The Ninth International Conference on Education in Sparsely Populated Areas (Andrae, 1976) aimed to reach a better understanding of how schools can act as activating factors in the life of sparsely populated areas. Solstad (1994) described three categories of school-community relationships. He termed these community-ignorant schools, community-passive schools and 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 attained the category of community-active schools. They argued that societal progress in combination with educational policies forces municipalities to become part of a "continuing cycle of centralization", which means that most small rural primary schools exist on "extended time" (p. 114). These schools are constantly challenged, trying to re-legitimate their place in the Finnish school network.

In their research review, Kalaoja and Pietarinen (2009) 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 stimuli 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 in the development of a curriculum that is locally-orientated and where the whole school evolves into a social nexus for the village. While teachers have often lived in the communities they serve, sometimes even in the school building, Kalaoja and Pietarinen comment that there is an increasing trend for teachers to live in larger urban centres and to commute to their village schools. Thus they become only loosely linked into the local community. This is a risk that island schools are not subjected to.

In Sweden, there were 39 schools on 33 small islands. In 2006, two of these schools were mothballed, a term used for schools that have closed but may be reopened in the future. These are on two islands, each with about 100 permanent inhabitants. One of these islands, Sandhamn, has about 1500 summer inhabitants and about 3000 visitors (day trippers) per day during the summer period (total annual visitors = 100,000). The other island, Nämdö, has a website where, under a link for school, information is given that the school has been mothballed, with the following rider: "beget some children" (Larsson, 2017). Why are some islands, with stable or relatively stable populations forced to mothball their schools? One reason is because they are experiencing the third category of rural citizenship described by Singh et al. (2008), where professionals and retired people are choosing a rural or island life as a lifestyle—a process of gentrification (Clark et al., 2007).

Egelund and Laustsen (2006) have studied the consequences of school closures for small communities in Denmark. They were able to single out three typical closure scenarios, which they termed: the "lively local society", the "dying local society" and the "small island society" (pp. 435–436). They comment that when "a school closure takes place on an island it is in many ways the death-blow to the island community" (p. 436). Dwindling population, caused by lack of employment, is the end product of a development that, in spite of good intentions, has become impossible to halt. They describe the "dying local society" (p. 436) 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, a 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). Therefore, 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" and how might these trends be reflected in the viability of the local school on Clare Island?

Findings relating to the depletion/consolidation argument

I have calculated information from the available roll books from St Patrick's National School, Clare Island, and this information is shown in Table 3. The enrolment for 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, however, would be only a minor adjustment to the data presented. The key point is that the school enrolment numbers appear to be relatively stable.

Year	Buachaillí (Boys)	Cailiní (Girls)	Total number of children	From total number of families
2015/2016	9	11	20	13
2010/2011	11	9	20	12
2006/20007	12	5	17	10
2001/2002	9	9	18	12
1996/1997	9	11	20	10
1991/1992	14	10	24	11
1986	Information not available			
1981				
1979				
1966				

Table 3: *St Patrick's National School enrolment numbers from available school enrolment books*

However, Table 3 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 households on the island that "were rearing families" (p. 259); that is, these households had children under 18 years of age. The daily attendance books (not roll books) for September 1965 are shown in Table 4. The critical point of this table is that it records a time when Clare Island had two national schools. This was the last record for St Brigid's School, 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 had no negative impact on the community.

School	Boys	Girls

St Brigid's	3	4
St. Patrick's	7	3

Table 4: ***Attendance records for the two Clare Island schools in 1965***

Another piece of evidence is presented in Figure 1. The photograph from 1992 shows those children who were enrolled at the school in that year. Two children are missing from the picture. 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 6th class, enrolment replacement requires three babies to be born (or move to the island) each year. This is more or less happening.

The photograph in Figure 1 is an artefact, a piece of paper (in the author's possession); yet it is something all of the subjects in the photo still relate to. It was posted on Facebook by one of the author's sons during 2015. When it was posted, responses were often couched in language indicating a tongue-in-cheek regret that "we didn't have it as good as the kids today," referring to some of the changes at the school, including the extra schoolroom, broadband and digital projector. Such responses are an oblique affirmation by past pupils of the vitality of the school today.

Figure 1: ***Photograph of island school children from 1992 (2 children missing)***
(Photo from Gill Family archive)

Findings relating to the academic achievement argument

The photograph in Figure 1 is presented as evidence to rebut arguments about risks of lower academic achievement in small rural schools. The photograph was taken in 1992, when two of the author's children were attending the school. Table 5, where calculations are made for the subsequent academic achievements of the children in Figure 1, provides evidence of the post-school academic success of the pupils.

Table 5 compares percentages of tertiary academic achievement for European adults in the age group 25–34 with the achievements of the school children in the photograph. The conclusion is quite clear. The island children are well educated in comparison with the other data that are presented. One of the students from the island school has completed a PhD, corresponding to 4% of the school group. Another boy from Figure 1 has been accepted for a PhD program. It is important to point out that the majority of parents of the children in Figure 1 do not have any third level (tertiary) education. Some of the parents would only have had primary school education.

Location	Tertiary (short cycle	BA	MA	PhD	Total
Island school (N= 22, as per Figure 1, 1992)	13%	45%	18%	4% (N=1)	80%
Ireland	12%	29%	9%	1%	51%
United Kingdom	8%	31%	10%	1%	49%
Norway	14%	22%	12%	0	49%
Sweden	10%	22%	13%	1%	46%
Denmark	4%	22%	15%	1%	42%
OECD average	7%	15%	14%	1%	41%
EU21 average	6%	12%	16%	1%	39%

Table 5. ***Percentage of adults who have attained tertiary education, by type of program aged 25–34***
(European and OECD data are from OECD, 2015)

Findings: 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 photograph in Figure 2. This figure shows school children from 2015 performing at their annual Christmas concert in the community hall on the island. The author has 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. No single event that takes place on the island throughout the year receives such support and draws such local attendance as this one. The event is more than a concert, as short plays and sketches are performed and 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 2: ***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 on the island 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 that 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 represents a stable, vital element of the "new mosaic of rural regions" in Europe (Persson & Westholm, 1994, p. 409). 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 rests. The school is at the very heart of the "lively local society" of young families (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006, p. 435). 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 coexists symbiotically with the island school.

At the concert shown in Figure 2, the author was particularly struck by one performance. A 10-year-old Lithuanian boy stood up to perform. Both his parents are Lithuanian. His father crews one of the fish farm service boats and his mother, with an infant daughter born while they have been living on the island, works at the Community Centre. Their bilingual son (Lithuanian and English) stood up and, in perfect Irish, sung an ancient ballad in the *Sean nós* style common to Irish-speaking regions of the west of Ireland. Clare Islanders do not speak Irish. Conversations with the alumni of the school, many of whom attend the Christmas concert, having come from far and wide, make it quite clear how much the "living school" is part of their personal and collective psyche.

Discussion

Case studies can and ought to be used to inform educational policy deliberations. Diversity and heterogeneity are hallmarks of marginal regions. What pertains on one offshore island may not be the case on another. This, without doubt, is the case on Ireland's offshore islands and it is particularly the case in regard to island schools. In many ways, the school studied here is quite possibly an exceptional case, when having regard to the statistics about tertiary studies that were presented. In seeking explanations for why one island school, as a motor for sustainability, viability and vitality, might differ so much from other Irish island schools, it is important not to view islands as a cohesive group. Small differences in diseconomic and disbenefit parameters may result in large differences in sustainability, viability and vitality. Clare Island School is an activating factor in the natural life of a sparsely populated area. It is clearly a community-active school (Solstad, 1994), not existing on "extended time" (Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009, p. 114), and it does not need to be nudged to partake in community development by functioning as a hub for community activities.

There are some signs that a gentrification process (Clark et al., 2007) is happening on a number of Irish islands. However, Clare Island is not one of them. Given the stance of the Irish Department of Education, it is highly unlikely that those island schools under threat of closure due to falling enrolment would be mothballed (Nämndö, 2017). Their fate would be, as Egelund and Laustsen (2006) have described, to become a "dying local society" (p. 436), where the closure of a school delivers the deathblow. The school on Clare Island well matches Egelund and Laustsen's description of a "lively local society" (p. 435), serving as a hub of activity for the local population.

Because small islands are special cases, it is difficult to generate hypotheses that cover more than one island. Why does one island become gentrified and another not? The Irish Atlantic islands differ from many European small islands in that access to them is extremely weather dependent. However, weather does not explain why the schools on Clare Island's two neighbouring islands, Inishturk and Inishbofin (see Table 2), are struggling to maintain numbers. The Irish island with easiest access, Sherkin, would appear to offer more to Singh et al.'s (2008) generally affluent retirees than to families with small children.

Unusual among Irish islands, Clare Island has had a functioning offshore fish farm for the past 30 years. This has resulted in all-year employment for a considerable number of islanders. Some of the employees have families with children in the school. The link between communal viability and the progress of the school is symbiotic. One of the children in the photograph in Figure 1 is now a teacher in the school. The headmaster of the school has put down roots on the island and two of his children attend. The Lithuanian child in the school at the moment is there because his father works on the fish farm and his mother in the Community Centre. The youngest child in the school, with an American mother, is there because his parents decided to come to the island to raise their children. The child's father was in the photograph in Figure 1 and has achieved a PhD, as per the information in Table 5. He is currently testing a bifurcated lifestyle between a part-time academic research post on the mainland and raising his children on the island. The two children with a German mother are in the school because their father is permanently employed on the fish farm.

This case study has not been about the economic and social forces that contribute to the viability of communities in marginal regions. The goal was to examine the role played by a small rural school as a driver for communal vitality and sustainability. That it is, is beyond question. It costs more to run this school, but the return is immense. A viable permanent population presents a goal for seasonal visitors that is different from islands and communities where gentrification may have brought about a situation where "CNN has come to the village, but (where) community spirit has left" (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006, p. 436) and where the small island school may have been mothballed in hope, or it may have been closed, never to open again.

All the inhabited offshore islands share infrastructural advantages and disadvantages. European Common Agricultural Policy transfers—farmers, piers, boats and tourism—are equally available. All the islands act as seasonal tourism magnets. On Saturday, August 5th, 1995, Gill and Cullen (1995) estimated that 10,000 visitors had taken themselves to Ireland's offshore islands, increasing the population more than three times. Twenty-two years later this ratio is continually on the increase, but not numbers of children in the school roll books. The school on Clare Island has fared best. Because it has, the school makes a vital contribution to maintaining the attractiveness of the island for potential new in-migrants. The vulnerabilities remain, but so does the potential.

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