Education isolation: the challenges for coastal and rural schools in England

Dr Tanya Ovenden-Hope
Dr Rowena Passy

Plymouth Institute of Education
Plymouth University
Where we started: The Coastal Academies project

* Qualitative investigation*
* Builds on three related studies that explored how ‘coastal academies’ approached the task of changing school culture to effect school improvement:
  * a seven year longitudinal study following one academy from the time of conversion in 2010
  * a ‘pilot’ study of three academies
  * Comparative analysis of six ‘first phase’ academies located in seaside towns / cities in England

*in which we studied publicly-available data; examined school documentation; Interviewed principal/executive principal in each school; Interviewed a sample of four teachers in each school
Why we investigated: Coastal context

School performance appeared affected by isolation
  * Socio-economic
  * Educational
Each appeared to have an impact on three critical issues
  * Student expectations
  * Teacher recruitment
  * Teacher retention
Could and should coastal schools be compared for outcomes/workforce with all inland schools? (see DfE, 2016; SchoolDASH, 2015)
Interviewees reported:
- seasonal and/or minimum wage local employment
- few manufacturing and/or professional opportunities
- multi-generational low or unemployment

Compounded by other factors:
- (some) geographical isolation
- depleted economy
- low skills base
- falling demand for property → cheap housing:

‘This has served to turn some seaside towns into veritable dumping grounds for groups such as care leavers, people with substance abuse problems, those with mental health issues and ex-offenders, for whom placing authorities can easily find low-cost accommodation’ (Centre for Social Justice, 2013, p.6).
* Parents’ poor experience (in many cases) in the ‘predecessor’ school

* Poor local employment conditions and opportunities

‘I mean I've thought about it with the seaside thing ... It’s the redundancies in the 80s and early 90s where a huge amount of males were made redundant ... Now we're teaching ... probably the second generation of kids that have gone through a whole life [without seeing their parents employed] ... I think that's got a lot to do with it. They just, they don't see, they don't connect school with employment ... I would say on the whole, the vast majority of the boys just don't see a future, [a connection] between what they're doing in this place and what's going to be happening in 18 months’ time (Senior leader).
Teacher recruitment/retention

Recruitment

* Limited employment prospects for partners of more experienced teachers
* Geographical isolation: those not in stable relationships wanted a wide range of social opportunities

Retention

* Lack of ‘churn’ in long serving teachers
* Higher attrition of early career teachers

- ‘Our location ... is rural and coastal, so you've got a limited pool of people to pull from’ (School Leader).
- ‘We're actually finding that now it's not only the STEM subjects, but it's the other subjects across the board that we're finding difficulty in recruiting. ... I need, desperately need a Learning Director for English because my current one is going to be retiring at the end of the year; I've advertised twice now and I've got not a single bite’ (School Leader)
Educational isolation

- No local university (in some cases)
- Struggling or ‘coasting’ local schools

‘There is no Outstanding secondary school, whereas if you went to a metropolitan area we would see the Outstanding secondary schools. They've been loaded, they've had designations such as National Support Schools, the National Leaders of Education and they, in many instances, are the local hubs in school improvement’ (School Leader)

- Absence of school improvement initiatives

‘Some of the initiatives which I've been used to in city areas weren't immediately apparent here. And so the really strong, sharply-focused school improvement initiatives which were spawned out of first National Strategies and then the City Challenges, they were conspicuous in their absence’ (School Leader)

- Inward-looking nature of school improvement

‘What you don’t get is a lot of refresh. So in big cities and conurbations, you get movement in and out ... [Here, schools] tend to look inwards for their solutions and for school improvement. I think that’s a massive risk’ (School Leader)
And funding ...

* Secretary of State reviewed and revised funding formula, but coastal regions with high deprivation e.g. Cornwall, were and continue to receive inadequate funding.
Have the challenges for coastal and rural schools been missed in public reporting?

Performance

* 3% lower performance in five GCSE’s A* - C including Maths and English in coastal schools compared to inland schools (SchoolDASH, 2015)

* Schools workforce in England 2010 to 2015: trends and geographical comparisons (DfE, September 2016) states that ‘there does not appear to be much difference between coastal and inland schools’ (2016: 52)

HOWEVER

DfE data compares coastal schools with ALL inland schools, which include both rural and urban.
We suggest a more appropriate comparison (for public reporting) on both school performance data and workforce data would be the grouping of coastal and rural schools*, comparing them to remaining inland schools. There are greater similarities between coastal and rural schools in terms of:

* **Isolation** – educationally, socio-economically and in many cases geographically

* **Absence of targeted government funding initiatives**

*There is also a consideration for including small schools in this group.*
Coastal and rural schools compared

* Fewer teachers move to other schools from coastal and rural schools compared with inland urban schools
* Fewer new entrants to coastal and rural than all inland schools
* Fewer NQTs in coastal and rural than all inland schools

(DfE, 2016)

Among the areas showing the most significant coastal-inland differences in 2015 GCSE attainment were Essex (17 percentage points), Suffolk (17), East Sussex (16), North Yorkshire (15), Kent (8), West Sussex (8), Cumbria (7) and Hampshire (6) – counties where inland includes high proportions of rural schools.

(SchoolDASH, 2015)
Partners in our Educational Isolation Research (September 2017)

* Plymouth University
* Plymouth Marjon University
* University of Gloucester
* Ambition Schools Leadership
* Texas A&M International University
Please don’t hesitate to contact us:

Dr Tanya Ovenden-Hope tanya.ovenden-hope@plymouth.ac.uk
tanya.ovendenhope@cornwall.ac.uk

Dr Rowena Passy r.passy@plymouth.ac.uk

References


