

# Education in a democratic and multicultural Commonwealth



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## Introduction

The following discussion on education and democracy takes as its premise that issues of multiculturalism include not only contemporary aspects of diversity based on language, religion, nationality and social class but also historical diversities in society. At a time when complex processes of devolution and integration are taking place simultaneously within socially diverse societies, there is a need to educate young people about the multicultural nature of societies and the importance within them of democracy and citizenship. Education has a powerful role to play in strengthening democracies and making them more inclusive. It can enable young people to understand their rights, obligations and responsibilities as active citizens. This presents educational institutions with the challenge of bridging divides by providing access to diverse groups in society and nurturing conversations that can help create shared values within the public domain and public institutions.

## Communities of development and hope

Processes of devolution, national integration and mass migration place complex pressures on national educational systems to engage in teaching democratically at local levels while recognising the centralisation of power at national or supranational levels. Democratic schools and multicultural classrooms can organise teaching and learning that enables young people to appreciate the complexity of societies and develop shared understandings. Provision for lifelong learning and informal education can also form the basis of inclusive learning communities with collective voices that cut across communal divides.

Such developments can contribute to the establishment of what Judith Green calls 'communities of development and hope' (Green, 1998: 431). Individuals and groups need a sense of agency to engage with issues of exclusion within diverse communities and explore what Green refers to as the deeper democratic features of diverse and complex modern societies (ibid). These features include a critical understanding of intercultural issues highlighted by indigenous or immigrant minorities, who should be seen not as 'others' but as presenting possibilities for complex interactions at individual and community levels to form a basis for Bookchin's (1992) 'confederal communities'.

Hence deep democracy has dynamic and imaginative features that draw on individual stories and those of the community. (The term 'deep democracy' is generally used to describe democracy that goes beyond the formal institutional framework that governs a society to encompass a set of concepts, structures and practices that extend to the level of the community and to the very core of individuals.) Personal knowledge confers the confidence to deal with issues and to contribute to public life and public institutions with greater competence. Such a development of a collective critical consciousness would contribute to re-building the 'public square', as discussed by West (1994). The public square includes public institutions and the need to engage with issues of democratic and intercultural relations and turn exclusions into inclusions. Schools and other civic institutions that have greater levels of autonomy need to be supported because they facilitate 'public discussions, coalition development and multinational community building' and can help develop the skills and capacities required by active democratic citizenship (Green, 1998: 437).

Deep democracies can spring from small beginnings. An impressive recent British pioneer in this field, the Scarman Trust, sponsors small self-help projects in run-down communities. These have a 'can-do' mentality that uses a community's own capacities and initiatives to reduce inequalities and bridge group divides. For example, one project enabled a group of jobless youngsters to acquire the house they were squatting in, renovate it as a hostel and then go on to renovate other derelict properties (Scarman Trust, 1999).

Nevertheless, there are numerous hurdles in developing such transformative institutions because 'persistent fundamentalism and differentiation in religious, ethnic and national identities are juxtaposed with increasingly interpenetrated cultures' (March and Olsen, 1995: 7). What makes divisions based on the above issues particularly threatening to the prospects of deep democracy is the success of appeals to ethnic, gender, racial and ethnic identities that have led to a decline in confidence not only in democracy but in good governance. The pressures of an economic urban and rural underclass, rising populations and depleting resources are a major challenge for Commonwealth States. These pressures can lead to greater divides through the effects of economic globalisation and 'global consciousness of disparities of wealth and well being' (ibid).



Institutions in society have an educative role so that they can foster sacrifices not selfishness and self-discipline that encourages civility rather than negating it (March and Olsen, 1995: 49). Invoking the consciousness of the civic and the collective develops notions of the common good, and requires the shaping of inclusive solidarity based on a sense of security and belonging. Specific personal identities need to be shaped to that of being a citizen, so that the private self is confirmed in the public. This requires the state to develop institutions “that are capable of maintaining trust and mutual affection within a polity while simultaneously accommodating... demands based on family ties, religion, ethnicity, language or personal affinity” (ibid: 55).

Cultivating this community of citizens – who are defined by a bundle of rights, duties and responsibilities – should be an essential aspect of diverse polities where the ethos of civic virtue is absent. Nevertheless, introducing civic education that informs socially diverse young and adult learners of their roles in society is a complex task. It entails an involvement in critical public debate that acknowledges the legitimacy of multiculturalism and accepts both conflict and opposition as aspects of the knowledge required to deal with the complexities of life in society.

Such a political life assumes that young citizens have a set of identities rather than one dominant or singular identity. It also assumes that good governance will empower the positive experiences of the key political identities. It entails the management of conflicts as well as inconsistencies. Deep democracies, however, embody the seeds of deep conflict as well as the simpler ones of self-interest and public interest, which are in continual tension. Education for democratic citizenship entails the learning of rules needed to negotiate reasonably in situations of such complex conflicts and to become active citizens in multicultural communities.

Establishing processes that are acceptable to learners requires teachers to understand the difficulties of teaching and learning in socially diverse societies and to stress the resolution of conflicts through conversation and mediation. In many cases there can be agreement about what constitutes ‘the common good’ and a commitment to democratic processes, even when differences and contradictions remain unresolved. The powerful rules governing democratic negotiation and civility are difficult not only to teach but also to learn. Nevertheless, knowledge, skills and competencies can be acquired and sharpened through education and democratic learning experiences in democratically organised schools and institutions.

Democratic engagements are more complex in societies that have higher levels of inequalities and social differentiation. Hence greater levels of equity between rights, resources, competencies, knowledge and organisational capacities would help the chances of democratic accommodations and solutions being worked out. “A key objective is to produce a political community within which citizens can discuss political issues in an atmosphere of mutual trust, tolerance and sympathy” (March and Olsen, 1995: 244). The absence of these measures, and the inability to strengthen cohesive democratic cultures, may lead to the fragmentation of such polities or to alternative models of authoritarian government (Dahl 1998: 145-65).

Most contemporary societies embody complexities, paradoxes, contradictions and a deepening of differences as a result of high levels of socio-economic inequalities. These contradictions need to be addressed in all areas of public, social and private lives to enable aspects of deep democracy to be forged. At the community level, there needs to be more interaction between enablers and can-doers who are active citizens in many countries around the world. In the absence of these engagements, linguistic, cultural, religious and nationality divides can become wider.

## Schools, universities and civil society

Schools and universities have an important role in most Commonwealth societies in uncovering the hidden and ignored past to build a more inclusive notion of the present. They can also assist governments in devising the intellectual basis of inclusive policies that can assist in making societies more socially just. In the absence of integrative or inclusive government policies, forces can become galvanised that reinforce identity politics and strengthen identity-based organisations and activities. Schools and higher education system thus also confront the complex task of dealing with the very specific concerns expressed by identity-based organisations, as well as the intensification of racial, ethnic and gender-specific politics that challenge the construction of a more inclusive and shared knowledge. Yet, as Peter Kwong recalls, “The objective of defining identity should not be an abstract theoretical exercise. In fact, the original mission of ethnic studies and Asian American studies was to end racism in the spirit of the larger struggle for equality and social justice” (South End Press Collective, 1998: 65-6).

Deepening democracy means strengthening the institutions of civil society and especially the non-governmental sector. Forging overlapping interests can allow the development of a movement with a broader base of popular support and political power that can help to establish frameworks and influence state institutions to become more just, inclusive and democratic. Here the issue of human rights is particularly important in the demands of socially excluded groups for greater justice. The mobilisation of grassroots movements has, for instance, led to major United Nations Conferences based around single issues, e.g. Social Development (Copenhagen), Environment (Rio de Janeiro), Women (Beijing) and Climate (Kyoto). Those who have worked around these issues are also able to see the interconnections between them and develop agendas on a broader front. While the UN system has not subsequently developed a coherent policy and action-oriented approach, it is possible that Commonwealth Ministers of Education as well as Heads of State can develop effective strategies to deal with some of these broader issues, and that education systems can act as enabling agencies in this process.

Over the years the Commonwealth, which started as a political institution based on colonisation and historical accident, has increasingly become a norm-based organisation and has involved itself in asserting issues of human rights within democratic contexts. This has included the establishment of Commonwealth Youth Centres to develop the values of democracy, diversity and human rights among young people (Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 1997). The Commonwealth’s Asian Youth



Programme, for example, has enabled young people to develop a deep commitment to institutionalised Commonwealth principles of human rights and democracy. Moreover, the multicultural and multilingual Commonwealth is a powerful counterweight to other organisations that do not embody the same elements of social diversity.

At the local level, there are growing numbers of community-based 'can-doers' who have helped change the agendas of divided neighbourhoods. For example, the catalyst provided by one civil society organisation in enabling this can-do mentality has borne fruit in small but meaningful initiatives in parts of several British cities that in the past had been the scene of resistance, racism and crime. Establishing new communities and coalitions based on shared interests requires the development of new strategies, including media-based pedagogies. Here the role of education must always be to establish a critical citizenship and an active engagement that is not merely part of an ideological arsenal.

## Citizenship and diversity

The challenge for citizenship is to mould the one out of the many and to construct appropriate educational responses to difference and diversity. In this regard, education policy initiatives of anti-racism or multiculturalism that are merely directed at immigrants or indigenous minorities and do not include the dominant groups or majority populations may not be useful. What is important is to initiate through citizenship a 'tendency towards equality' (Marshall, 1977) by creating basic conditions leading to social equality. Hence, social equalities can be achieved by removing hindrances like 'institutional racism' and 'glass ceilings' whereby minorities or women never reach the top of institutions or organisations.

Education systems also confront the challenge of helping to build inclusive polities by accommodating notions of difference and creating conditions of belonging for diverse groups. In educational institutions such initiatives can be a 'creative moment' since notions of citizenship can help develop like-mindedness by reducing inequalities between groups.

Some elements of diversity can be counterproductive if they conflict with citizenship and liberal democratic principles. There is already a legacy of exclusive and negative imaginations of racism, xenophobia, chauvinism and sexism. However, democratic educational institutions using intercultural and anti-racist policies can develop greater levels of access to knowledge, skills and shared values through institutional initiatives.

## Democracy and citizenship education

Citizenship as a modern concept is realisable in the Commonwealth only in the context of democratic and constitutional states. Citizens of these modern states have rights that have been acquired after long struggles and cannot be easily ignored or denied. However, in some cases it is not the state but a particular community that may deny women their rights to education or employment. The conferring of citizenship rights entails opposing such practices, and public institutions need to

distinguish which values of different communities are acceptable and do not violate the rights of girls, women or other vulnerable groups. The state has a role in creating level playing fields, and in education it can do this by intervening.

We currently also face a dilemma because old solidarities and mutualities have been destroyed, especially as the younger generation is divided into those who are winners and losers. The notion of citizenship education where the losers owe nothing to the winners is a difficult but critical issue. To ensure that young people do not accept binary divides and adhere to their rights, obligations and responsibilities, the political culture cannot be based on narrow national or ethnic notions. It has to be symbolically and substantively based on inclusive good values that can attract disenchanted young people, especially those from subordinated and marginalised groups. Constitutional and human rights principles, and other progressive and democratic struggles, can also form part of this learning process.

Among many young people the notion of being part of complex localities is important. Hence, the notion of territorial belongingness that is not exclusive but shared is worth exploring within schools and youth clubs. There is a need to develop non-exclusivist neighbourhoods that are not no-go areas for others but are, as Bookchin has called them, 'confederal communities' (1992). Such communities would be based on shared resemblances that are neither racist nor patriarchal. This means developing their interactive and intercultural aspects within complex and socially diverse schools and communities.

## Deep citizenship

Notions of how to develop deep democracy based on deep social participation and citizenship require urgent attention because the private market has no public obligations and the role of mixed economies becomes more important. The role of social capital among citizens is now also recognised by the World Bank.

Deep democracy demands deep citizenship. The development of civic values in public and private domains to activate civic virtues puts into place a new, non-traditional understanding of citizenship. Here deep democracy can be assisted by eliminating the previous private/ public divide and admitting the civic virtues to wide areas of life: '[M]ost generally wherever one can act towards the universal, therein lie the civic virtues and therein lies deep citizenship' (Clarke, 1996: 118).

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**Jagdish Singh Gundara** served as commissioner of the Commission for Racial Equality from 2002 to 2006. He is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of London and holds the UNESCO Chair in Intercultural Studies and Teacher Education at the Institute of Education. His previous roles include Deputy Secretary-General of the Indian Ocean International Historical Association; founding member of the International Association for Micro-States Studies; European Intercultural Parliamentary Group; and Director and Vice-chairperson of the International Broadcasting Trust. Professor Gundara is President of the International Association for Intercultural Education, and a trustee and Chairman of the Scarman Trust. He has published extensively in the fields of intercultural education in socially diverse societies.