

Global citizenship, our values and international education



Stuart Mole

A competitive global economy places new demands on national education systems to meet the range and scale of skills required. In turn, high quality, world class education requires partnership between different educational systems, recognising mutual problems, sharing best practice and applying world standards in measuring attainment.

But today's global citizen, more likely than ever to engage with a world beyond their home country, must be more than a collection of tradable skills and a willingness to travel. Alvin Toffler, the futurist with a mission to prepare us for tomorrow, has written: 'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn'.

In part, the ability of global citizens to adapt to change will depend on their self-confidence and self-awareness; their relationships with others and their understanding of difference; their capacity for critical analysis of changing society while still comfortable with their place in the community and the world and with expressing and sustaining the sometimes multiple identities which they may possess.

There also needs to be appreciation of broader shared values – not only of an interdependent humanity – but also that social justice, democracy, human rights and sustainable development are the birthright of all.

There was a time when we might have believed that this would happen naturally, in the expectation that minds would expand in parallel with enlarging horizons. Sadly, this is far from true and the ugly rise of xenophobia and ethnic conflict does not suggest that foreign travel, a global media and greater cultural exposure necessarily results in increased understanding, respect for difference or a growing appreciation of the concerns of a common humanity.

Commonwealth values

Commonwealth education ministers meet in Cape Town (South Africa) in December 2006, in order to grapple with many of the issues of quality international education. Among their number will be some of the fastest-growing and most dynamic economies in the world, as well as some of the poorest; creativity and innovation will be needed in their policy-making. The Commonwealth's capacity to connect one quarter of humanity, across all continents and oceans and to communicate with both

ease and informality, through the *lingua franca* of English, are powerful aids to embracing change and creating global citizens.

In addition to connection and communication, the Commonwealth's third great theme is its values. The Commonwealth's ability to uphold and promote universal values, through education as well as in a myriad of other ways, is an important part of its contemporary mission.

Past

Much of the modern Commonwealth's recent history has been directed consciously at sustaining its core values. Issues of equality, both political and racial, were major preoccupations, with the former leading to the birth of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965. Racism in Southern Africa – particularly in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and apartheid in South Africa – presented a direct challenge to the Commonwealth's ethos and led to the sustained and, ultimately, successful involvement of the organisation in the campaign for fundamental change.

More recently still, the aftermath of the great struggles over apartheid saw the Commonwealth's critics – for sometimes mixed motives – take the association to task because of some members in its ranks whose commitment to democracy and human rights left a lot to be desired. It proved to be a salutary wake-up call. In 1991, there were no fewer than 9 single-party or military regimes among the Commonwealth's 47 members (a disturbingly high proportion). The adoption of the Commonwealth Harare Declaration in the same year signaled a determination to tackle the issue head on.

By the start of the new century, the Commonwealth had a much better story to tell. It had removed the privileges of membership from those who had acquired power by violent or unconstitutional measures. It had facilitated the transformation of a series of single-party states into functioning, multi-party democracies. It had suspended some – such as the oppressive and dictatorial regime of General Abacha in Nigeria – and had successfully assisted in the restoration of democracy and respect for human rights in such cases. And, as important, it had established a mechanism – an action group of Commonwealth Ministers (CMAG) – to tackle the sustained and flagrant abuse of Commonwealth principles (as set out in the Harare Declaration) wherever this might occur. That said, the Commonwealth has had its share of failures, not least (ironically) in Zimbabwe under the



former host of the 1991 summit, Robert Mugabe. But, on the whole, the story has been a good one, with results that have been far-reaching and largely effective.

Why then is it so little told?

Present

For some member countries, the immediate priority in education is the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) set by the United Nations, or at least sustaining the gains that have been made. One-third of the Commonwealth's 1.8 billion people live on less than one dollar per day; nearly two-thirds of the world's maternal deaths and HIV/AIDS cases occur in its member countries and the Commonwealth accounts for the majority of the world's children with no access to education. By 2005, some thirty-one of the Commonwealth's fifty-three member countries had made either slow or negligible progress on the MDGs, so achieving the 2015 targets is an understandable preoccupation.

Others in a more privileged position have made only limited progress in preparing their pupils to be 'global', much less Commonwealth, citizens. And yet teaching about the Commonwealth's history, its institutions, its functions and indeed its potential, is an important part of explaining and dramatising the significance and universality of the Commonwealth's shared values.

Resources

There are, after all, an impressive range of institutions and facilities devoted to information and education about the Commonwealth. These bodies include the Commonwealth Secretariat's Communications and Public Affairs Division, the Commonwealth Foundation (particularly concerned with civil society, art and culture) the Royal Commonwealth Society (also working on behalf of the Joint Commonwealth Societies' Council in promoting Commonwealth Day), the British Council, the Museum of British Empire and Commonwealth in Bristol, The Round Table (and its publication of that name, subtitled *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*), diplomatic missions and governments, the centres of Commonwealth studies in different countries, scholarly library collections, specialist professional associations and dedicated journals, scholarship and fellowship programmes.

There have been a number of key reports on aspects of this work. As the result of an initiative by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the Commonwealth Education Ministers Conference of 1994, the Commission on Commonwealth Studies was born. This led to the 1996 Report *Learning from each other: Commonwealth studies for the 21st Century*, otherwise known as the Symons Report after the Commission's Chairman, Professor Tom Symons. Equally important was the work carried out by Derek Ingram in 1997 on Commonwealth information services, entitled *Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Information Programme*.

Yet, while possessing this formidable infrastructure, the Commonwealth has surprisingly failed to articulate any coherent strategy for information and learning about the Commonwealth. This was despite the need, emphasised by leaders at their 1997

Edinburgh Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), that 'member countries and the Secretariat (should) project the Commonwealth's role and activities within member states and to the wider world in a more effective manner, including through the school system'.

The Commonwealth community

The four-yearly Commonwealth Games, last held in Melbourne, Australia in March 2006, regularly defies its critics by being a spectacular global sporting occasion, watched by many millions. It is also an excellent opportunity to project the Commonwealth and some of its underlying values. Melbourne was no exception, achieving the highest standards of sporting excellence while also in other respects exemplifying those features that have earned it the title 'The Friendly Games'.

The 2002 Commonwealth Games, held in Manchester, England, were accompanied in the UK by a major initiative in citizenship education. Indeed, it was 2002 when 'citizenship' (including study of the Commonwealth) was introduced into the secondary school curriculum in the United Kingdom for the first time. Pupils were encouraged to think about:

the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding [as well as] the world as a global community (including) the role of the European Union, the Commonwealth and the United Nations.

In one of its last projects in its former role, the Commonwealth Institute produced a resource pack for schools, taking as its focus the 'Spirit of Friendship Festival', a 6 month programme of events encompassing both the Commonwealth Games and the Golden Jubilee of HM Queen Elizabeth II, which fell in the same year. The Institute was also commissioned to organise the 'Commonwealth Parade' down the Mall to Buckingham Palace in London, at the height of the jubilee celebrations.

Commonwealth initiatives

At the same time, the Royal Commonwealth Society, on behalf of the Joint Commonwealth Societies' Council, organises the premier UK celebration of Commonwealth Day, a multi-faith observance in Westminster Abbey, London, usually attended by The Queen, the Commonwealth Secretary-General and the British Prime Minister. The Royal Commonwealth Society is also responsible for the production and distribution of The Queen's Commonwealth Day Message across the Commonwealth (including to schools) and produces a Resource Pack (incorporating the Secretariat's Commonwealth Day poster, a quiz, a CD-ROM of films and other materials) for school and community use.

There are other valuable initiatives that can contribute to citizenship education and an understanding of the role of the modern Commonwealth. For some years, the RCS has organised a series of regional and national Youth 'CHOGMs', in London and in some of the UK's major cities, especially those with ethnically diverse populations. Ostensibly, these are a fun simulation of the Commonwealth summit, where young people role-play presidents and foreign ministers, debating issues and tackling unexpected crises. In reality, bringing young people together from very



THE COMMONWEALTH

An association of 53 independent states working together in the common interests of their citizens for development, democracy and peace.

The Commonwealth comprises 53 nations around the globe. It spans from the Americas to the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific.

The flags illustrated are stylised representations and neither the proportions nor the colours are guaranteed true. Map credit: ComSec Map in Minutes (TM) July 2005

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different cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds and from different faith communities, within a Commonwealth context, is an important learning process. Local authorities are often the hosts and giving the participants concerned the run of the Town Hall where they can also discuss issues of immediate concern to young people, makes citizenship development an important component of these events.

Among other relevant projects is the Commonwealth Clubs in Schools initiative being pioneered by the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, London and financed by the UK's Department for Education and Skills. Early on, its organisers were surprised to learn that the notion of Commonwealth Clubs in schools was far better rooted and better supported in Nigeria and Cameroon than it was in the United Kingdom.

As valuable as these initiatives are, it will need greater leadership from member governments to win the hearts and minds of the new generation of Commonwealth peoples.

Conclusion

Six years ago, when Commonwealth education ministers met in Halifax, Canada, they stated unequivocally:

Citizenship education is crucial to developing and reinforcing each individual's personal sense of worth and responsibility and to building a robust civil society in which individuals have the knowledge, skills and capacities needed to fully engage in the democratic institutions and processes of their community and country.

They added:

The use of education to promote values of democracy, human rights, citizenship, good governance, tolerance etc, as espoused by the Commonwealth in its key declarations of principles, should be strengthened. This should include development of life skills curriculum and the training of teachers in this year.

However, 3 years later, in Edinburgh Scotland, the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CEEM) made only passing reference, merely saying that:

It is important to provide opportunities for young people to learn about the Commonwealth and its values.

The challenge therefore falls to the Commonwealth gathered in Cape Town for 16 CCEM and its related meetings. Will education ministers provide leadership on the issue and reinvigorate debate and action by a strong statement of intent? Will the young people taking part in the youth forum articulate the needs and aspirations of a new generation of Commonwealth and global citizens? Will teachers and stakeholders respond through their own practical involvement? And will Commonwealth and other agencies with a contribution to make (including the Commonwealth Secretariat) do more to work together and provide projects, materials and initiatives that can really make a difference?

Time will tell – but all the education initiatives in the world will mean nothing if the global citizens of the future fail to recognise their inseparable humanity.

Biographical notes

Stuart Mole has been the Director-General of the Royal Commonwealth Society since May 2000. A former teacher, he worked for 16 years in the Commonwealth Secretariat, latterly as Director of the Secretary-General's Office.