

EXTENDED EDITORIAL: EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH

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Our editorial above has noted delight in being able to welcome Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth to Edinburgh in October 2003. We drew attention to the theme of the event - Access, Inclusion and Achievement: Closing the Gap. Because we aim to launch this new era of the SER from an understanding of education being located in international social, political and economic conditions, we take this opportunity to delineate some of these wider concerns from a Commonwealth perspective. Future editions may focus upon other global contexts, such as Scottish education in a European perspective.

The editorial has also drawn attention to the importance we place on various structures and processes of research. It is our intention to encourage publication of reports and articles from the widest educational community. Notably, we will welcome contributions which result from collaboration between those in higher education and in schools, variations of teacher practitioner research. We recognise that collaboration in preparation for, conducting research and writing papers from that research is all part of teachers' continuing professional development.

Finally, we would encourage papers and articles, reports and reviews which interweave home-based educational policy issues and research with what is happening in the wider world. We aim to locate Scotland's education in that context. To that end, we outline below some of the international, comparative and Commonwealth educational issues out of which may arise various research agendas. The sections below indicate what is happening with education in the Commonwealth. We hope that the issues raised may encourage not only an understanding of the depth and breadth of education in the Commonwealth but may extend still further our research and collegial commitment in Scotland to this wider world.

At the conclusion of their Conference in Halifax, Canada in 2000, Commonwealth Ministers noted, 'We believe in the right of everyone to education. All persons have a right of access to lifelong learning, by every appropriate means, with full opportunity regardless of gender, race, colour, age, socio-economic status, physical and other disabilities, or geographic location. Education is an essential prerequisite for individuals to achieve their full potential.'

Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st Century, governments have been encouraged to make commitments to see education as the cornerstone of development by achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to raise the quality of schooling even where MDGs have been achieved. Yet only 83 countries, comprising 34% of the world's population, have achieved – or will achieve – the three target goals by 2015.

Notwithstanding these problems, global gatherings have placed Education For All (EFA) and quality and standards in education at the heart of strategies to enhance social, economic and political development. Net enrolment ratios in most Commonwealth developing countries are either on the point of attaining – or have already attained – the goal of universal primary education. This is important because research by the World Bank and others shows very clearly that getting most of the population to complete primary education of decent quality, is the foundation for economic development.

Education, therefore, is a central plank of the global sustainable development agenda. Policies for high quality education are key mechanisms for human capital

development in all Commonwealth countries – whether of the North or South, whether developed or developing, whether predominately industrial or predominately agricultural. Education has been written into national strategic plans following many Commonwealth meetings and particularly the announcement of plans for economic and political development through new programmes for aid for Africa development (NePAD) assistance.

Recent and very exciting developments have been initiated by the UK in the form of the Commonwealth Education Fund – a fund to support education projects for sustainable human capital development in 17 countries of the Commonwealth.

It is therefore reasonable to argue that countries of the Commonwealth can provide mutual aid in support of development and implementation of policies for quality education; to increase the rates of entry to further and higher education; to facilitate the introduction of qualifications frameworks as a force for quality and standards in education; to advise upon policies for innovations in curricula design, development and implementation, these frequently being based upon new information and communication technologies.

However, although there have been improvements in the provision and quality of education in many Commonwealth countries, the Commonwealth, today, is still characterised by unacceptable levels of poverty: nearly 650 million Commonwealth citizens live on less than 60p a day; 800m adults, of whom 60% are women, remain illiterate; 110m school-aged children of whom 76m are Commonwealth children, and of these more than 60% are girls, do not have access to education. Of the world's nine high population countries four with the lowest enrolment and literacy levels are member countries of the Commonwealth.

Whilst significant progress has been made by Commonwealth Ministries of Education in addressing issues of access, inclusion and achievement, disparities exist in enrolment and performance within localities and provinces, between educational provision in the metropolis and the rural area, between schools in the same locality, between genders and within and between socio-economic groups.

There are gaps between countries of the Commonwealth and the wider world: 60-70% of the shortfall in countries achieving the MDGs are from the Commonwealth. There are also gaps between countries of the Commonwealth - the GDP co-efficient in many industrialised countries of the Commonwealth is lower than for 'developing' countries, for example Sri Lanka; and there are gaps in access and provision between groups within each country - in Australia, for example, research has found that 15% of all 15 year olds have insufficient literacy to pursue further education. 'Development', therefore, is not an absolute but a relative - and malleable - concept which works in different ways in different geographical, regional, economic and social contexts.

Amartya Sen notes that the purpose of development is the expansion of freedom. Development consists of the removal of the various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency (Sen, 1999).

For those in the teaching profession this is important. There are huge disparities across the Commonwealth: gaps exist between teachers, their pay and conditions of service and the pay and conditions of service of other workers. All too frequently, to make a living wage, teachers are forced to undertake two, even three and four, other paying jobs. Teacher absence from classrooms and even emigration to other educational systems, is a worrying and continuing problem.

There are other gaps also: there is a disconnectedness between family, school and community – where the cultural capital acquired through schooling is not matched by home and community or where home and community have demands not met by unattractive and inadequate schools; between education and work where expectations raised by schooling cannot be met by employment opportunities or where economic

and commercial developments require levels of skilled personnel not yet provided through countries' educational systems; and there are gaps between what is taught in schools—the curriculum content—and what is needed for effective living, in societies impacted upon by fast moving and changing global pressures.

Even with quality education in place, and routes of access, inclusion and achievement defined, still poverty may be rife: in Scotland 30% of children are classified as living under the poverty line, yet EFA goals are achieved and access to education is not considered a particular problem.

The 'gaps' in access, inclusion and achievement between regions of a country may be as severe a barrier to quality education as the 'gaps' in provision between countries of the Commonwealth and between Commonwealth countries and the rest of the world. So whilst one of the most important outcomes of primary education is effective literacy, this cannot necessarily be assumed by focusing on nationally-derived enrolment statistics. Since 1995 literacy rates have increased substantially in all developing regions but there are problems still: in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa adult literacy rates are just 60% leaving major issues still to be addressed.

Similarly, whilst governments introduce policies to empower more girls and eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary schooling, around the world women still earn only 75% as much as men: 'glass ceilings' often come to mitigate against and even prohibit female advancement at work and in careers. For all countries, the Gender Development Index (GDI) is lower than the Human Development Index (HDI) indicating general inequality everywhere. Although female access to education may be an encouraging sign of growing equality between the sexes, there is little evidence of similar equality in employment. Therefore, although in some circumstances, access issues have been addressed, problems in achievement and employment remain.

Increasing girls' and women's participation in education has been identified as one of the most significant developmental challenges facing many – but certainly not all - countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In these countries, enrolment of girls remains lower than that of boys, their dropout and absenteeism rates are higher and their achievements and performance poorer. Once in schools, girls often have high repetition, failure and drop-out rates, resulting in low primary completion rates. Globally, girls still constitute 2/3 of those excluded from Basic Education, with the largest number of excluded girls being in S Asia.

But gender disparities do not impact on girls alone. Evidence is fast accumulating of boys' underachievement in education. For some countries of the Commonwealth there is a growing 'laddism' at work: boys appear to be removing themselves voluntarily both mentally and, with increasing frequency, physically from classroom and educational activities. In these countries, boys exit schooling after five, six, ten years of formal, basic education with few, if any, qualifications, questionable levels of literacy and little of the cultural and social capital usually associated with schooling. In Malaysia, for example, 70% of medical students are female, across the board, 60% of university students are female.

RESEARCH ON EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Given these concerns, it is apparent that support for research on education in the Commonwealth is much needed. Research may take different forms – it may be aid agency or university led; it may be teacher practitioner based, or it may be the result of collaboration between academics and teacher practitioners from a number of Commonwealth countries.

The following allude to clarifying definitions and hence to some of the issues which may be addressed:

Access:

- The provision of an education system that is free or at a cost that is not unreasonable given local circumstances;
- The development of an education system that is open to all children and young people to an age that is generally accepted as appropriate;
- The maintenance of an education system that is available throughout lifetime;
- The provision of a system that is available in the locality or community.

Inclusion:

- The promotion and maintenance of an ethos of equality and educational opportunity for all citizens regardless of religion, ethnicity, ability or gender;
- Focus upon a monitoring of and commitment to increase enrolment rates;
- The need to ensure that all children can continue in education whilst ill or disabled, are caught in conflict or live in difficult circumstances.

Achievement:

- Standards and their measurement so that educational systems continue to produce confident and qualified young people through schooling and older people through lifelong learning;
- The commitment to visions of education as a force for social justice, human development and social well being.

ACCESS

Possible research on Access to primary and secondary schooling – removing *the barriers affecting widening access:*

Home-school-community:

- Through community involvement, involve parents and gain support for education;
- Address issues of school location and distances to schools in particular catchment areas by providing e.g. more schools, more teachers, support for distance learning;
- Address natural barriers to attendance of school such as mountains, rivers, adverse seasonal conditions by reviewing location and numbers of schools, numbers of teachers, mode of delivery of teaching and learning;
- Encourage a variety of role models within local communities.

Educational:

- Whilst recognising the absence from schooling of both male and female teachers for different reasons, encourage greater commitment from staff;
- Provide discussion about and funding for single-sex schools where wanted;
- Note the relevance of Faith Schools for some communities, not necessarily only communities in conflict-torn situations;

- Move from rigid school calendars and inappropriate and irrelevant curricula in schools;
- Recognise the poor quality of the learning environment and upgrade unattractive schools;
- Move from ill-formed school planning policies.

Personal:

- Increase toilet facilities in schools;
- Provide transport to/from schools.

Political:

- high direct costs of schooling – how to work at reducing these costs;
- high opportunity costs of schooling – how to reduce these costs and to make the financing of schooling sustainable.

Not all Commonwealth countries face the same problems or, indeed, deal with them in similar ways. In some countries the absence of girls' schools, in others the absence of peace and stability, have been barriers to achieving the goal of accessing education for all. According to UNICEF, over the past decade, almost 2 million children have been killed in wars, over half in Commonwealth countries. All of the 15 countries (of which 12 are in the Commonwealth) identified under the UN Special Initiative on Africa as requiring urgent support because enrolment rates have been less than 50% have been or still are undergoing serious civil conflict. In these countries the enrolment for girls is just 13–31% and 23–49% for boys.

However, although differences in regional, rural/urban, class, and funding of schools all create factors impacting on unequal distribution, there are lessons to be learnt from each other. There is a need for Ministries to share successful initiatives, strategies, models which address problems outlined above and their achievement of the MDGs. These can be examined in terms of:

Policy Initiatives and Strategies:

- Are programmes supported with sufficient resources to ensure implementation? Do these programmes reach remote areas?
- Are local and community groups involved in these programmes?
- Are there special incentives to encourage participation (free textbooks, tuition) and achievement (merit-based scholarships, awards)?

Community and NGOs:

- Do the daily schedules of schools, and their yearly calendars, conflict with the demands from parents and communities on girls' and boys' time?
- Are NGOs involved in promoting access and participation locally?
- What strategies have they used? What lessons can be learnt from these interventions?
- Have there been policies to reduce demands for child labour?

Gender:

- Is it appropriate to increase the number of female teachers? What is male-female ratio? Are there special programmes and schools to encourage female participation?

Management and Monitoring Performance:

- Has there been a review of administrative and fiscal policies that restrict opportunities for schooling and post-school employment?
- What specific policies should the government implement in order to increase access?

Access, therefore, must be seen not only as a physical issue, but also as economic (affordability), social and cultural (attractive to potential learners). Lack of supply does keep many out of education but lack of demand, because what is on offer is so unattractive, also, is a major contributory factor in under-enrolment. Balanced education development is necessary for stimulation of demand: after all, no-one wants to attend unattractive, 'dead-end' schools.

INCLUSION

Inclusion relates closely to access. It involves reaching out to all kinds of minorities, but reaching out to them culturally, with an education that responds to their particular situations and needs – not just the physical needs. The majority of the estimated 100m disabled children in Commonwealth countries remain deprived of learning opportunities, although boys with disabilities are more likely than girls to attend schools. In fact literacy rates for women with disabilities are extremely low.

Minority ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic groups, nomads, those with special needs, criminals, refugees, those in conflict-torn societies all must have their needs addressed.

Inclusion has to embrace the different generations and to accept that more effort needs to be made with adults, lifelong learning and continuous re-learning. But there are difficult questions. Costs escalate as one tries to draw into the education system the last 10% or 20%. It is not necessarily democratic to hold back the majority 80% from junior secondary education while the UPE problem is solved.

Support for Inclusive Education

- Be sensitive to diversity in societies, this being the result of social, cultural, political and personal difference;
- Provide access to education for those (children and adults) with disabilities; recognise the difficulty of getting to school and inaccessible environments;
- Make provision for 'special teachers', and appropriate teacher training, these often required by students with special needs;
- Recognise the impact on students of natural disasters and plan appropriate educational responses;
- Support those with HIV/AIDS and other health problems through appropriate educational facilities;
- Recognise the right to schooling, for migrant, nomadic and refugee children by attention to language and geography;
- Promote suitable learner-centred styles of teaching and learning;
- Develop appropriate curricula for those with special needs;
- Initiate political structures and national standards, to support Inclusion;
- Enhance legal frameworks and codes of practice for Inclusive Education.

- Recognise the importance of support mechanisms for Inclusive Education in homes, communities, schools and other educational institutions.

In the Commonwealth there are heartening examples of good practice for Inclusive Education. This is especially important, as there is clear evidence of build-up of problems associated with the absence of policies for Inclusive Education. These frequently are the result of lack of Ministerial collaboration, as well as over-zealous commitments to budget separation. Yet, as the EFA 2000 assessment exercise in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrated, there is great potential for partnership between Africa-based organisations, institutions and experts. So, too, with Commonwealth countries – supportive relations and common understandings of good practice can turn education problems into carefully drafted solutions.

Policy Initiatives and Strategies:

- Has the curriculum been widened to make it relevant to the largest cohort group?
- Have there been policies to facilitate specific communication needs of children, including lessons in Braille, sign language and use of audio tapes;
- What suitable programmes can be devised to cater for disabled children? Is there support for the running of specific programmes and schools?
- Is there awareness of needs for flexible curricula allowing adaptation of teaching methodologies, provision of accessible learning resources in classrooms, libraries? Has continuous assessment been introduced?

Community and NGOs:

- What are the significant constraints that hinder disabled children from enrolling in schools? Can distances between home and school be reduced? How can these barriers be overcome?
- Are parents and local groups involved in the determination of accessing disabled children into schools? Are parents and such groups being sensitised?

Gender:

- Has there been an awareness of the importance of public awareness concerning the rights of all children—especially disabled girls—to have access to and be included in education?
- Are there regular training sessions for teachers and education administrators on disability and its gendered impacts?

Management and Monitoring Performance:

- What specific policies should be implemented in order to increase inclusion?

ACHIEVEMENT

Learning to listen, learning to know oneself and others, learning from one another, are all part of what we mean by ‘achievement’. Whilst we have to be concerned with outcomes, we must also be sympathetically aware of the various processes involved in ‘achieving’ in education.

Achievement can have narrow and rather individualised connotations of personal competitive advantage and in the global labour market, it is understandable that

Ministries of Education and Governments might wish to promote this type of 'achievement'. However, a number of governments have noted that recent attempts to measure quality in terms of test scores and league tables may be limiting and rather inappropriate as forms of noting achievements.

Resources for Learning and Teaching – addressing the key barriers to achievement through:

- Provision of books and relevant facilities for Information and Communication Technology (ICT);
- Supporting the differential needs of those undertaking education in difficult circumstances;
- Ensuring suitable educational resources to address differences in achievement between girls and boys;
- Developing appropriate policies and resources for learning and teaching;
- Ensure teachers are recognised in appropriate ways and retained.

Monitoring and Measurement of Achievement – development of:

- Developing attainment targets, minimum levels of learning, qualifications and frameworks, standards and equivalencies;
- Providing opportunities by supporting appropriate models nuanced to local, regional, national and international contexts;
- Developing school improvement programmes for Small States;
- Initiating scholarships and exchanges within higher education, teacher training and professional development;
- Develop institutions and procedures for inter-Ministerial co-operation.

Primary school completion rates – address:

- Security at school – enhance personal and collective security;
- Provision of suitable schooling and encourage flexible school hours
- Encourage opportunities for post-schooling employment prospects;
- Use education to address propensity for early pregnancies and cultural practices for early marriages, initiation ceremonies and domestic work;
- Bonded labour in agriculture and industry;
- Language policies;
- Teacher recruitment, deployment and mobility policies;
- Existence of child labour: need to ensure all children benefit from schooling;
- Sexual harassment by staff over students and students over others;
- Forced conscription into armed conflict;
- HIV/AIDS and other health-related causes of absence from schooling.

Whilst governments face the challenge of providing adequate financing for education, constraints on public resources have limited the ability of many countries to address educational challenges. Since the mid-1980s the share of public expenditure on education in Africa, for example, has decreased in 15 countries (9 of them Commonwealth countries) and the share is less than 3% in 12 countries (8 of them Commonwealth). A joint UNESCO-UNICEF survey revealed that in 10 of 14 countries, one third of pupils were being taught in classrooms without usable

blackboards. Over 30% of pupils did not have a desk or chair and one third of pupils were attending schools without access to safe water supplies. It is difficult to focus upon 'achievement in education' when such essential facilities are missing.

The following questions may help our readers from the widest educational — school and research — communities, to address the issues of Achievement as they relate to the MDGs:

Policy Initiatives and Strategies:

- How adequate are education facilities for the achievement of EFA goals?
- How large are classes: are there strategies to support achievement in large classes?
- What levels of training have teachers undertaken before reaching the classrooms? And how relevant are the teaching methods being used in teaching and learning?
- What do schools and establishments lack by way of resources? What measures can the government take to provide necessary resources?
- Is the curriculum suitable to make schooling relevant for employment and for reaching and maintaining high levels of achievement?
- Have there been discussions about the role of vocational education and its relationship to academic curricula?

Community and NGOs:

- What can communities do to support achievement? How can they be supported?

Gender:

- Are educational establishments involved in conflict and strife: is civil war part of the everyday reality of education? What strategies are in place to encourage the return of child soldiers and females to the classroom, and into education, following periods of conflict? What strategies can be adopted to aid schooling and lifelong learning in such areas?

Management and Monitoring Performance:

- Has management discussed credit transfer arrangements and the development of qualification frameworks to enable permeation between different curricula?

Our intention in presenting this outline of some of the key issues for education in the Commonwealth, is to draw to our readers' attention the possibilities which exist for collaborative and personal research. There are immense opportunities for those within higher educational establishments and for those within schools and non-formal educational settings to work collaboratively on research; research which can then impact meaningfully on policy. Our hopes are that through the reading not only of this extended editorial but also through the reading of these articles, we can work together to help and advise policy makers from throughout the Commonwealth on the ways forward for extending access, widening inclusion and enhancing achievement in education.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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