

Cuba - Education for all

Cuba Solidarity Campaign UK, Submission to the 4th Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, Cuba, March 2023

The following submission to the Universal Periodic Review on Cuba is made by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC) in Britain.

1 The Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The rights afforded to children constitute the most important indicator of the character and quality of the adherence of nation states to the underlying principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself.

This submission is mindful of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In particular this submission reflects on the principles embodied in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20th November 1989 which entered into force on 2nd September 1990 in accordance with Article 49.

Article 28 of the UN Conventions states that:

1. States recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;

(b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;

(c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;

(d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;

(e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.

2 Delegation report produced by the National Education Union in England and Wales (See <https://cuba-solidarity.org.uk/resources/nut-report-2023-03.pdf>)

This submission draws extensively on the first hand information obtained by the official delegation of the National Education Union in England and Wales. The NEU is the largest teaching union in Britain and represents almost half a million teachers. This delegation visited Cuba between 22nd October to 29th October 2022. They produced a delegation report which was adopted by the National Union of Teachers and was presented to their Annual Conference in April 2023.

The delegation of 22 members consisted of highly qualified teachers working in primary, secondary and special education. In making their evaluations of the Cuban Education system and the treatment of children they drew on their own extensive experience, comparing the standards of education in Cuba with that in England and Wales. The CSC has the consent of the National Union of Teachers to draw on their report for this submission.

The aim of the NEU delegation was to explore how Cuba had achieved many of the Millennium Development Goals, especially Goal 2 on universal primary education. They noted that this had been achieved despite the economic challenges faced by Cuban society and in particular the burden placed on it by the United States blockade of Cuba still in place after more than 60 years. As the World Bank has commented this burden is in stark contrast to most other countries in Latin America and in the neighbouring islands of the Caribbean.

The findings of the NEU delegation were summarised with the statement:

“Whilst the schools are desperately short of material resources, the commitment to education is incredible. Around 24 per cent of the government’s budget is devoted to education, which is highly valued in Cuba. Teachers are respected and children have a real sense of joy at being at school”

They noted that the breadth and depth of the curriculum was apparent with students enjoying a wide range of subjects and experiences with the arts and music held in obvious esteem and a clear commitment to citizenship and PSHE.

They noted that one of the most striking differences between the Cuban Education system and that of their own was the status given to the professionals working in the education system where high quality training is a key factor in maintaining a skilled and knowledgeable workforce.

The group visited two primary and secondary schools, a specialist music school, two schools for the blind and visually impaired, a school for autistic children and a university.

“What shone through in all was the quality of the relationships between teachers and children, children and children, and staff”

The delegation asserted that this was in direct contrast to the way in which education was developing in the UK, and globally, where the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) is progressively turning education into a business reliant on high stakes testing, privatisation and casualisation of the work force.

The NEU Delegation 2022 was the fifth such delegation to Cuba. Over 100 teachers have now visited the island as part of this official programme.

The following factors contribute significantly to the high standards and achievements of the Cuban education system:

1. Education is given top priority in terms of resource allocation and public policy.
2. Students follow a broad and balanced national curriculum with arts, physical exercise and humanities allocated significant time.
3. Teachers are highly qualified and have significant input into the design of the system at local and national levels.
4. The system is student-centred, involving students in making decisions about their learning from an early age.
5. Equality and diversity are central in terms of attitudes toward staff and students.

We believe that there is much to learn from the Cuban education system and that policy-makers and teachers in other countries should themselves engage with the lessons from Cuba's educational successes.

3 Cuban education- a success story for all

The Cuban education system evolved rapidly following the 1959 revolution. Prior to that, over 40% of the population was illiterate and only a minority of children attended school. Illiteracy was all but eradicated in 1961 and this was followed up with a campaign for every citizen to achieve 6th grade education. Education is the highest priority in Cuba with a 13% share of the country's GDP which compares to 6% in the UK.

All schools in Cuba are state-funded and run by municipal government as part of a national education system.

The current system is divided into four main phases:

- 1) pre-school – children can attend pre-school from the age of 6 months. The pre -schools are jointly governed by education/childcare professionals and parent committees.
- 2) primary school – children aged 6-11 cover a common curriculum including Spanish, maths, history, art, music, dance, physical education, gardening and health & hygiene.
- 3) secondary school / pre-university – children aged 12-16 cover a common curriculum for the first three years then continue either into pre-university education or technical/professional training for the last years of secondary school.
- 4) university / technical college / adult education – Cuba offers a wide range of post-compulsory education, including undergraduate and postgraduate courses at one of the island's universities or distance-learning institutions. It is not uncommon for Cubans to combine work with study and every worker has the right to paid time off to further their education.

Education is fully government-funded at all levels and provided free of charge from pre-school to university and adult education. The target class size in primary schools is a maximum of 20 – achieved in 93% of schools. Where classes exceed 20 there are two teachers.

Every class is taught by a qualified teacher. Teaching is a graduate profession and 42% of teachers have masters-level degrees or doctorates in education. Professional development, including at masters and doctorate level, is free of charge and teachers are given release time in order to study.

Teaching is a high-status occupation in Cuba. The government gives a high priority to education and this comes across clearly in the attitude towards teachers in society in general and in schools in particular.

Teachers are highly-qualified and have a high level of professional autonomy, exercising professional judgement over curriculum, assessment and planning the school's schemes of work together.

4 Valuing Learners

One of the most noticeable things on entering a Cuban school are the high levels of motivation amongst the students.

There are a number of reasons for this, including the high value Cuban society places on education, the status accorded to teachers and the positive role model that line the walls of Cuban classrooms, from Che Guevara to Albert Einstein.

However, one key factor is the love and respect given to Cuban students by their teachers and by the system as a whole. There is no system of high-stakes testing in Cuban schools and students are relaxed about the exams they sit. When we asked a group of secondary students whether they were worried about upcoming exams, their answer was refreshing: "I don't worry. As long as I study hard and do the best I can, I will be pleased."

Teachers have a close relationship with their students, covering both academic and pastoral roles, and the Head teacher of one school we visited described their role as that of a second set of parents to the students: "When they are here, they are our children and that is how we treat them, with love."

Parents are given paid release time from work to attend regular meetings with their children's teachers.

From the moment they start primary school, Cuban students have a lot of input and influence in the running of their schools. Every class elects a class president, vice-president, and health and hygiene officer. These students take on a number of responsibilities within the classroom, including motivation and behaviour of fellow students, and submission of homework. The students also elect a school president and vice-president who, together with the class presidents and vice-presidents, form the student council.

The student council has input into the curriculum and administration of the school and the school student president sits on the 'direction committee' of the school, alongside the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher, Heads of Year and an elected parent.

5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The Cuban education system is founded on the principles of inclusion, equality and respect for diversity.

This is evident from entering any Cuban classroom, where you will find a range of role-models on the walls, representing the breadth and diversity of Cuban society, as well as specific posters about equalities. The large numbers of Black Cubans and Women in leadership positions within education and society more broadly is particularly noticeable, coming from a country like Britain where institutional racism and sexism is a daily reality.

The majority of head teachers and school leaders are women and this is reflective of other professions where 60% of doctors, 58% of scientists and 66% of professionals are women. 48% of members in the National Assembly are women, the third highest proportion in the world.

6 Arts and education in Cuba

The presence of the arts in Cuban schools is noticeable throughout the education system. Arts are not only fully integrated into the curriculum, with time given to drawing, painting, sculpture, music

and dance, the children are also surrounded by artwork and music in their classrooms and playgrounds.

The NEU delegation also visited a specialist music school. Teachers from this school visit primary schools to encourage students to apply if they have an interest and/or aptitude for music. The students have an extended school day which is split in two. For half the day, they cover the normal curriculum at the same pace their peers. For the other half, they have specialist music lessons in small groups or one-to-one. Students then have the option to go on to university or technical training, or to pursue a career in the Arts.

As well as the provision of specialist schools across the Arts, the standard of art and music in mainstream schools was incredibly high and the time given in the curriculum for studying these subjects was substantial.

8 Summary

On the evidence of the adopted report from the National Education Union which has been corroborated by many other educational professionals the Cuba Solidarity Campaign is of the view that the Republic of Cuba not only has high ideals in the field of education and at its core for the well-being of children, but implements the goals enumerated in the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child and in so doing adheres to the principles embodied in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.