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Cuba Solidarity Campaign UK, Submission to the 3rd Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, Cuba, May 2018,

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Cover page

The Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC) is the British organisation for the defence of Cuba and its peoples' right to self-determination and national sovereignty.

The Cuba Solidarity Campaign is the British organisation for solidarity with Cuba. Our central offices are in London. We have 30 regional groups throughout the UK. We have around 4800 individual members and over 500 affiliated organisations including almost every Trade Union in the UK, representing around 6 million Trade Union members. CSC holds an Annual General Meeting which elects an Executive Committee of 36 members each year which coordinates the Campaign's work.

CSC is a broad based organisation open to all. It is a not for profit voluntary organisation. CSC works closely with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Cuba and holds regular information meetings with the representatives of the British Government and Foreign Office. CSC publishes a quarterly magazine, Cuba Si, which is sent to all members and friends.

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(2751 words)

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The following submission to the Universal Periodic Review 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 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.

The rights afforded to children constitute one of, if not 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. 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 Union of Teachers in England and Wales [1] [2]

This submission draws extensively on the first hand information obtained by the official delegation of the National Union of Teachers in England and Wales. The NUT is the largest teaching union in Britain. This delegation visited Cuba between 22nd October to 29th October 2016. They produced a delegation report which was adopted by the National Union of Teachers and was presented to their Annual Conference on 14th April 2017.

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.

[1] https://www.teachers.org.uk/sites/default/files2014/nut-report-2017-04.pdf
[2] https://www.teachers.org.uk/

The aim of the NUT delegation was to explore how Cuba had achieved many of the Millennium Development Goals even before they were set, 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 almost 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 NUT delegation were summarised with the statement:

"Every school, college and workplace that they visited demonstrated an absolute commitment to the educational achievement of everyone, whatever their circumstance or ability. This was reflected in the integrated way that health and social care systems worked with schools to remove obstacles to progress reflected for example in the entitlement of parents to paid time off work to have regular meetings with teachers."

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 were very impressed with the educational attainment of the students, with some classes working 1-2 years ahead of comparable students in Britain.

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.

"Teachers," they commented, "are seen as the experts in their field and are fully consulted about any changes to the curriculum or education policy. In fact, any such changes generally come from 'below' through school and union fora." This was a consequence of the fact that teachers and students are represented at every level of decision making from school councils up to parliament itself.

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. "It is nothing short of amazing that a country under such economic restrictions is able to provide an example for the rest of the world," the report added.

The delegation expressed the opinion that they "quickly realised that they had so much more to learn from Cuba than the other way round. The delegates affirmed that they returned to Britain, renewed and energised to fight for an education system that puts children at its heart and that respects and empowers its staff."

The NUT Delegation report went on to state that:

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 these five factors pose significant challenge to the direction of travel of education policy in England and Wales, and in many countries internationally.
It is imperative that policy-makers and teachers themselves engage with the lessons from Cuba's successful education system.

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 The National Union of Education, Science and Sports Workers (SNTECD)

A key component to the Cuban educational success story is the role of the teachers themselves and their trade union. There is one united teachers' union in Cuba, the National Union of Education, Science and Sports Workers (SNTECD), which grew out of the pre-revolutionary teachers union and was formally established in 1962. Membership of the union is on a voluntary basis and its work is funded solely by member subscriptions. The union is organised on the basis of workplace branches and holds an annual policy-making conference.

Elected officials in the SNTECD, up to and including the General Secretary, are released from their teaching posts to take up their elected role and continue to receive their teachers' salary. There are no additional payments or salary for union work.

The teachers' union is involved in the policy-making process at local, municipal and national level. A great example of this is the process of curriculum reform which was taking place in Cuba during our delegation.

The reform process begins with the teachers' union initiating a discussion in the workplace branches to generate proposals which are discussed by the Council of Ministers and form the basis of legislation. This legislation is then put back to the union, as well as the other mass organisations, including the School Students' Union, University Students' Union, and Federation of Women, for further discussion. Meetings are held in every workplace and amendments submitted through union structures. Crucially, when the final draft is produced, it cannot come into operation until it has been agreed not just by the National Assembly but also by the teachers' union.

As the General Secretary of the SNTECD said to us when explaining the system, "How can a teacher be expected to implement a curriculum if they have not been involved in developing it?"

5 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.

This 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.

6 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
in leadership positions within education and society more broadly is particularly noticeable, coming from a country like Britain where institutional racism 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.

One of the most influential mass organisations in Cuba is the Federation of Cuban Women, which has over three million members, representing 80% of the female population.

They have been instrumental in bringing forward legislation to promote women’s rights, in particular the 1975 Family Code which states that women and men must share household responsibilities equally.

As part of our delegation, we visited the Abel Santamaria special school for visually-impaired students. During our visit, teachers emphasised that the students have the same curriculum as in mainstream schools with the main difference being the way in which materials are adapted,

additional resources (such as braille machines) are provided and additional support is given by medical professionals.

The school has a full-time optometrist who works with students one-to-one and in small groups, and class sizes are significantly smaller than in mainstream schools. Throughout, there was an ethos of respect and equality which was perfectly
captured by a sign in one of the classrooms which said:

'Cubans celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia in Havana'

Another sign in the Abel Santamaria school reads:

'Requirements of a student with a visual impairment. Give me freedom, challenges, independence, equality, demands, love. Do not give me overprotection, sympathy, pity.'

7 Arts and education in Cuba

The presence of the arts in Cuban schools was noticeable throughout our visit. At almost every school we visited, students performed or sang or danced for us. The 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. A number of the schools we visited had their outdoor walls decorated with huge murals. Many of these are painted by famous Cuban artists as their civic contribution to the education system.

We also visited two specialist schools, one a music school, the other an art school. Teachers from these schools visit primary schools to encourage students to apply if they have an interest and/or aptitude for music or art. 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 or art 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, 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 Union of Teachers 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 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.

Appendix
Comments by some members of the NUT delegation to Cuba 2016.

"Any Cuban will tell you that there is much more to do before they can say their system has succeeded but they firmly believe that the route out of poverty for everyone is education. Because of the USA's blockade the Cubans are forced to spend carefully and wisely and education must come first"

Karen Parkin, Primary School Teacher

"I was so impressed by the community spirit and positive atmosphere flowing everywhere. Having free universities was a way of opening the doors for all young people to educate them into the professions the country needs.The only debt the students said they had when they leave is a 'debt to the people'."

Niparun Nessa, Secondary school teacher Maths

"…during one school visit after another over the course of the NUT Cuba delegation, the word amor (love) cropped up in the head teachers' speeches as an important underlying principle guiding Cuban pedagogy. Just take a moment to think about that concept: love as the bedrock of state policy. …The only conclusion one can arrive at is that Cuba has taken a deeply-held popular faith in the child as a symbol of hope for the future and combined it with the socialist principle of free education for all, resulting in an extraordinary state commitment to investing in the human being as a communal asset."

Maggie Morgan, Secondary SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator)