

# **Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Minority Inclusion and Majority Rules**

## **The system of education in BiH as a paradigm of political violence on education**

*Adila Pasalic-Kreso*  
*Department of Education,*  
*Faculty of Philosophy, Sarajevo*

### **Introduction**

The educational system in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) is at one of its most important turning points. Like most post-socialist countries, BiH is going through a transition process. In addition, the country was exposed to extreme war-time destruction: genocide, urbicide, ethnic cleansing, mass casualties, migrations, and starvation for a period of three and one-half years. Education, one of the most susceptible subsystems in every society, suffered not only from physical destruction, but also from political, ideological, and nationalist pressure compounded by the war. The political agendas of the three nationalist parties (SDA, SDS, and HDZ) leading BiH since 1992-93 seem to create a wider gap between the three constitutive peoples: Bosniak (Muslim religion), Serb (Orthodox Christian religion), and Croat (Catholic religion). What could not be done in war continues to be attempted in peace by nationalist differentiation of education. Providing each group with its "own" education system promotes certain political and ideological goals (UNDP, 1998). In this article I analyze some of the weaknesses of the contemporary educational system in BiH.

### **The problem**

According to the Dayton Peace Agreement, BiH is constituted of two entities. One entity is the Federation of BiH (herein referred to as FBiH) with a majority Bosniak and Croat population, and the other entity, Republika Srpska (herein referred to as the RS) composed almost entirely of a Serb population. FBiH, in an administrative-judiciary sense, is divided into 10 cantons, and the RS into seven regions. According to the Constitution of FBiH (1995), "cantons are solely responsible for developing educational policies, including declarations for education, ensuring education, as well as developing and implementing cultural policies." Currently, the education administration in FBiH is conducted on several levels, including Federation, Canton, Municipality, and School levels, while the RS has kept central control of education. Since the author of this article works and lives in the territory of FBiH and therefore does not have access to all the information about the state of education in RS, this article shall only be concerned with problems in education in the territory of Fed BiH.

Although education is regulated by law, FBiH often runs into many dilemmas and obstacles in implementing its education policies. One dilemma concerns the question of whether to organize the public education system into special national schools with separate curricula. Many pages have been written on this topic in newspapers and journals in BiH, many discussions led, and many roundtables organized, yet still no solutions have been offered that would be acceptable to all sides. Furthermore, this presents political abuse of education at the national level that skillfully avoids each attempt toward sincere democratization and respect for cultural differences in the education system.

There is much manipulation of education for political and ideological purposes in BiH today. Education is often misused by providing students with different interpretations of the same facts. For example, curricula and textbooks may present the start of the war as aggression and occupation, or a fight for liberation and national emancipation. Was it genocide and ethnic cleansing of some parts of the territory, or it was it self-defense?

Often schools separate students based on their ethnicity, language, and religion. At the start of each school year (this is the fourth school year since the peace treaty) there is turmoil spurred by discussions of divided and undivided schools, divided and undivided classrooms, divided and undivided curricula. Also, each nationality that was involved in the recent conflict argues over the quality and acceptability of textbooks.

Problems arise especially when returnees start returning to their small towns and municipalities that were ethnically cleansed during the war. In these communities, education policies primarily reflect the domination of the majority group over minorities. Minority children are allowed access only to education organized to serve the needs of the majority students. Some of the majority community are hostile toward returnees and lock the doors of the schools. This type of behavior towards minorities demonstrates an unwillingness to accept life in a multiethnic community. Although this exclusion is not legislated, some nationalist leaders are politically powerful. These problems occur infrequently in big cities such as Sarajevo, Tuzla, Bihac and Zenica, which kept some multiethnic structure even during the war.

In areas where the majority population is Croat, some Croat municipality heads lock the school doors in front of children and teachers of the Bosniak minority. In municipalities where the Bosniak population is the majority, school leaders exclude attributes of the Croat nation and Croat culture from the school curriculum. Some Croat teachers and students refuse to attend schools with the Bosniak majority, and would rather conduct class under tents, using curricula from neighboring Croatia. There are many examples of lack of cooperation in the past three years. Although at the beginning of every school year solemn promises are made to solve all problems by the next school year, no real changes are made that prevent exclusion and separatist activity. It seems that we contemplate our education and school systems without theory, without studying the experiences of others, and in general without either an academic or professional approach to this important and sensitive field. This disorganization suits the political context very well, making the education system open to manipulation by those in power for the intentional indoctrination of students.

Education leaders in some BiH cantons forget that the responses to these dilemmas must be based on lasting and universal humanistic values in order to guarantee a democratic right to education. Solutions should not be found by relying on trial and error, or by experiments after which students emerge burned and scorched much like after a violent chemical explosion due to a carelessly and clumsily prepared reaction.

Because political and nationalist ideology dominates education, there are more educational experiments than universal solutions to the problems. When a problem is addressed partially, or approached one-sidedly, or led by daily-political interests and

not approached from a universal-humanistic or an academic and professional starting point, the effect becomes cyclical. Thus we go in circles around dilemmas such as: Will schools, by accepting the rights of an individual to a free choice of nationalist content in curricula, inescapably cause segregation and further ethnic separatism? Is it necessary for a school to give up national culture in school curricula completely to avoid national intolerance? The following dilemmas and questions appear to be the burning topics:

- 1) What type of education system is appropriate to a country in transition, such as BiH?
- 2) What values should dominate such education systems? According to what curricula should teaching be carried out?
- 3) What kinds of teachers are needed in these conditions?
- 4) What textbooks are needed?
- 5) Should three separate and nationalist systems be formed for the three constitutive groups or not?
- 6) Whose experiences should we take into consideration?

It is important to remember that these problems have already been encountered in many countries, nations, and cultures, and various more or less successful solutions have been formed. We must examine these experiences in order to be reminded of previous mistakes and to find solutions applicable to the educational reality in BiH. There have been many discussions that contribute to developing an understanding of the role of education in a multicultural society--for example, The Council of Europe and UNESCO alone have published dozens of books on this topic in the recent few years (e.g., Perotti, 1994).

### **The experiences of others**

Most European countries, as well as many other countries in the world, are multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual. They have developed their education systems to respond to their own needs and reality. Post-war education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing issues that are similar to those experienced by immigrant students in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. The principle dilemma in Western Europe at that time and in BiH today, is whether to organize separate schools and curricula for immigrants or to integrate all children based on the majority culture. Thus, today returnees in Bosnia bear a similarity to immigrants in Western Europe twenty to thirty years ago. At that time in Europe, unwieldy solutions engendered negative results in education leading from total assimilation and loss of ethnocultural and language identity on one hand, to a complete separation of foreign children from local children on the other. The inability to design ways to provide quality education that is equally accessible to every child harmed many immigrant children in the growing multicultural societies of Europe. These children were often denied access to language, intellectual, social, emotional and other branches of education (CRESAS, 1978a; Cox & Dayson, 1970; GFEN 1976,1977; Salvat, 1976).

Assimilationist ideology boils down to the melting or disappearance of a weaker culture when mixed with a stronger one, when ethnocultural specifics such as language and values are not adequately addressed in school. Assimilationists do not negate ethnic differences; rather, they see them as temporary, believing that they will disappear in a clash with the modernization of societies. Education and human development are

considered primarily processes of unification and globalization, opposite from those of ethnic affirmation and identification. Accepting this concept was spurred by the recognition of potential dangers from over-accentuating cultural, religious, and ethnic specifics of foreigners and minorities. However, an unwanted social polarization was created by including these children in public schools, without paying special attention to their language, culture, and family background. (See more in Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Husen, 1975; Jensen, 1973; Little & Smith, 1971; Banks, 1994).

Cultural separatist ideology was developed almost in parallel to the assimilationist ideology. It emphasizes the importance of ethnic identity and the need to develop a feeling of belonging to one's own ethnic group. According to this concept, members of the minority group are bound by duty to use all of their energy and abilities to fight for national emancipation and affirmation. This becomes a moral duty of each member of the minority ethnicity. Adherents to this ideology insist on curricula based on cultural uniqueness, and schools that help students to fully explore and accept their own culture, values, and aspirations (Mialaret, 1979; Segre, 1976).

These ideologies wreaked drastic consequences on the development of children. The assimilative approach "forced" children to fit into the majority culture as quickly as possible, and if they did not succeed they were left at the side and at blind intersections of the education system. The cultural separatist approach did not provide an opportunity for the youth to "exit" outside of their ethnoculture, and consequently take up highly valued positions in a society (Boudon, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; CRESAS, 1978b; GFEN, 1976, 1977).

From 1970 until the present, research studies on these ideologies and their consequences have enriched pedagogical, psychological, social, and other sciences with a multitude of new discoveries and solutions. Many academics have steered away from the above mentioned educational problems by developing multicultural and multilingual education, education for democracy and education for tolerance, unity, and mutual respect. Education theoreticians and practitioners accept that a school cannot stay neutral and ignore ethnic, cultural, as well as social, gender, health, and other student differences, which reflect the diversity of a society itself. This constitutes the core of a new educational "philosophy", strongly advocated for in Europe as well as in other multicultural societies in the past few decades (Perotti, 1994; Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 1996). Multiethnic and multicultural education could be a very important first step in including all children in common classes in BiH. Yet school environments based on positive attitudes toward differences is still a dream in some parts of BiH.

### **Conceptual doubt**

Mass destruction, killing, ethnic cleansing, and other misfortunes of wartime brought about much national and social shifting. One major effect of war was the existence of three regions, each one dominated by one of the constitutive peoples of BiH. In every region, canton, or municipality one of the nations forms the majority and the other two form the minority.

As a result, the education system in BiH is currently swaying between two extreme concepts that other European countries have left far behind. In each region the majority

nation pushes the assimilative concept for the minorities, while the minority nation fights for full educational and schooling autonomy. Traditionally, BiH has been characterized by multiethnicity, multiculturalism, unity, and common life, and therefore the appearance of extreme segregation in the education system is like the introduction of a foreign plant into an indigenous garden. If this situation continues, BiH society will educate individuals who will be culturally and ethnically encapsulated, unable to recognize and view not only a foreign culture, but their own as well. They will come of age in cultural and ethnic blindness.

The educational reality in BiH is strongly affected by nationalist forces threatening to implement unacceptable pedagogical solutions. The presence of nationalistic and ideological interests is registered on an everyday basis in the BiH educational system as they use education for political purposes. Time after time, in certain regions, the representatives of these forces insist on separating children into special national schools to follow different curricula and to be taught by teachers of the same nationality. Any attempt to create a common legislature, as well as attitudes and principles toward common education, schools, classes, textbooks and curricula cause, as a rule, an increase in nationalist tension, passions, and intolerance.

Avoiding working with children of a different nationality in a public school is akin to a doctor refusing care to a bleeding patient. There is no language problem in BiH such as in the case of the Arabs in France, the Turks in Germany or the Mexicans in the U.S. There is no problem of understanding each other linguistically among the nations of BiH, and although there is an attempt to increase multilingualism, it is difficult to accept any arguments advocating for separate schools or classrooms. The issue concerns primarily the cultural differences among Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs originating in different religious views. Pursuing certain ideologies, nationalist and religious leaders are striving to "import" curricula from neighboring Croatia or Serbia in order to "enable appropriate nationalist education" for the children of Croat or Serb nationality, to aggravate differences and separate people that have lived together for centuries.

For example, currently there are many debates surrounding the development of textbooks based on a group of national subjects such as language, literature, history, national music and folklore. These debates include discussions of textbook revisions that will omit content insulting others. Some educators have proposed developing standards for joint curricula that precisely determine the content of education, part of which will reflect national differences and specifics. However, it is hard to believe that this will solve all of the educational problems in BiH. A joint curriculum is important but it can unfortunately also be insufficient. It is well recognized that in educational practice there are two kinds of curricula--one formal and the other informal or "hidden" (Apple, 1993, 1996). The latter includes material influenced or dictated by the climate of the school itself, a school's culture and tradition, the environment of the region, the quality of teachers' work and also cooperation with parents and with a community. Although there may be significant gains from developing a quality formal curriculum, the hidden curriculum can undermine even the most progressive pedagogical solution. It therefore demands more attention and action.

In fact, poor political and judicial solutions, swaying morale, and disturbed values are among the many troubles that have already arisen in BiH as a result of this hidden curriculum. Changing the hidden curriculum therefore requires pedagogical, as well as political, judicial and moral resources. The education system in BiH must draw conclusions from mistakes made by other countries two or three decades ago and take into consideration the newest academic and practical solutions.

### **Inclusive education**

Sociocultural inclusion can be used as a basic driving force, a vehicle for further overall and meaningful educational reform. This is its greatest significance. It is important to view inclusive education as a process, an overall reform movement, an educational "philosophy" that should result in a "new type" of education, giving the youth new dimensions to their personalities, new horizons, and not only facts, but also knowledge and skills. To build a personal identity, a person must undergo multiple levels of identification--from global to national, social and sexual to individual (Banks, 1994). This can only be achieved through indirect educational work. This relatively new pedagogical concept, known as culturally responsive pedagogy, has helped to achieve many positive results in school practice. Culturally responsive pedagogy carries greater sensitivity toward students than traditional pedagogy. It not only acknowledges students' background, language, tradition, and culture, but also their specific learning styles (Lasley & Matczynski, 1997).

Throughout its reform, the educational system in BiH must pay attention to creating a culturally responsive pedagogy to satisfy the educational needs of every individual, including each minority member in every community. Minority groups in any community are always more vulnerable and sensitive than others. Therefore, everyone involved in education, including every teacher, must recognize his/her duty regarding minority education and always stay aware of issues facing minority students. This should be a motto for every teacher in BiH as we enter the third millennium. Such an approach will encourage the development of liberal, creative, and multicultural students who are critical consumers and creators of knowledge. Without this determination to create an inclusive educational environment for all, current and future pledges to democracy and multiculturalism will remain superficial, like labels on food items that do not specify the ingredients.

Education reform in BiH today must be a process of creating classrooms and schools with the integration of various cultures, languages, religions, abilities, and experiences, which are practically expressed through common schools, common classrooms, common curricula, and textbooks. Creating a common learning environment for all students is a necessary step towards sociocultural inclusion.

Experienced educators know that students differ in learning styles, in emotional and social characteristics, intellectual potential and physical appearance. All of these individual differences are bigger than any group differences, be they gender, race, nation or religion. Experienced educators also know that a democratic atmosphere that includes tolerance and respect for others must be gradually and professionally created.

Indoctrination, manipulation, or abuse of education for a variety of purposes will not reap benefits for anyone in the long run.

### **Conclusion**

The education system in BiH today resembles a broken glass that nationalist divisive politics is attempting to break into even smaller pieces. This does not lead to stabilizing BiH as a unified country. Taking into consideration the experiences of other multicultural societies, the education system in BiH must promote a vision of an open democratic society in which every individual, regardless of ethnic, cultural, religious, class, gender or other identities, has an equal chance to participate and succeed. Such an education system will provide an opportunity for individuals to nurture her/his ethnic identity and at the same time participate in a common culture or intersection of other cultures. One can nurture national norms and values if they are not in conflict with the overall values of justice, equality, and human dignity in a society. These universal values can unify all cultures in a society and promote social cohesion. BiH should be exceptionally interested in such an approach to education. Multiculturalism should not be a difficulty or an obstacle around which politicians cannot find their way--it is part of the richness of this country that should be nurtured and developed.

By over-emphasizing someone's ethnic, linguistic or religious preferences, one often forgets other characteristics of an individual, such as gender, social, generational, professional, intellectual, and many others. Educational practice fenced in by a nationalistic-political frame can not only cripple all other dimensions of a personality but also its developmental potential. These aspects of education are still not openly discussed in BiH and the acceptance of global purposes of education is only slowly developing (Delors, 1996).

In the BIH educational system there must be a complete reorganization of educational structure and practice, so that a school can become a place for open discussion and debate of all current differences. Perhaps this can be one of the paradigms to guide not only our education but also the future of BiH society.

### **References**

- Apple, M.W. (1993). *Official knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, M.W. (1996). *Cultural politics and education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Banks, J.A. (1994). *Multiethnic education: theory and practice*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Boudon, R. (1973). *L'inegalite des chances; la mobilite sociale dans les societes industrielles*. Paris: A. Colin.
- Bourdieu, R., & Passeron, J. C. (1970). *La reproduction: Elements pour une theorie du systeme d'enseignement*. Paris: Minuit.

- Coushner, K., McClelland, A., & Safford, P. (1996). *Human diversity in education: An integrative approach*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Cox, C. B., & Dyson, A. E. (Eds.) (1970). *Goodbye Mr. Short*. London: "Critical Quarterly" Society.
- Centre de recherche de l'education specialisee et de l'adaptation scolaire (CRESAS). (1978a). *Le handicap socioculturel en question*. Paris: Harmattan.
- Centre de recherche de l'education specialisee et de l'adaptation scolaire (CRESAS). (1987b). *Nouvelles etudes sur l'echec scolaire*. Paris: Harmattan.
- Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995). [Online]. Available at: [http://www.uni-wuerzburg.de/law/bk00000\\_.html](http://www.uni-wuerzburg.de/law/bk00000_.html)
- Delors, J. (1996). *Learning: The treasure within*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Groupe francais d'education nouvelle (GFEN). (1976). *L'echec scolaire, doue ou non doue*. Paris: GFEN.
- Groupe francais d'education nouvelle (GFEN). (1977). *Reussir a l'ecole*. Paris: GFEN.
- Husen, T. (1975). *Influence du milieu social sur la reussite scolaire*. Paris: OECD.
- International Roundtable. (1997). *Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: International Roundtable.
- Jensen, A. (1973). *Educational differences*. London: Methue.
- Lesley, T. J., & Matczynski, T. J. (1997). *Strategies for teaching in diverse society: Instructional models*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.
- Little, A., & Smith, G. (1971). *Strategies de compensation*. Paris: OECD.
- Mialaret, G. (1979). *Le droit de l'enfant a l'education*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Mougnotte, A. (1994). *Eduquer a la democratie*. Paris: Les Editions du CERF.
- Perotti, A. (1994). *The case for intercultural education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Press.
- Rogers, C., & Freiberg, J. H. (1994). *Freedom to learn*. New York: Macmillan International.
- Salvat, H. (1976). *L'intelligence, mythes et realites*. Paris: Editions sociales.
- Segre, M. (1976). *Ecole, formation, contradictions*. Paris: Editions Sociales.
- United Nations Development Program. (1998). *Human development report - Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: UNDP.