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Teacher Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: developments in the post-war, post-communist context

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about education provision in eastern European countries as they made the transition from communist to more democratic forms of government. Many writers have focused on the importance of education as a tool for modernising society, for example McLeish (2003, p.15) notes that ‘...the reform of existing educational practices be deemed a priority’. However, it is also claimed that many of these countries, despite the rhetoric of reform and the introduction of reforming legislation, have continued to maintain aspects of the ‘old system’ (Weiler et.al 1996, Cerch 1997, Alexander 1999). Educational reform is also important in post-war contexts, Popkewitz (1991 .13) considers ‘school reform’ to be one mechanism by which states attempt to achieve ‘cultural transformation, and national solidarity’, and this is particularly important in newly-formed states.

Several researchers (Dill and Maguire 1998, Fullan 2001, Lita 2004) acknowledge the important role played by teachers in implementing change, but it is also acknowledged that this is often difficult to achieve (Fullan 2001, Finnand and Lewin 2003). Leclerq (1996, p.83) notes that teachers’ ‘...capacity for change is not easy. Rapid and spectacular changes in their attitudes and practices are generally rare’. Pritchard (2002, p.57) also believes that, in post-communist countries, educational reforms ‘can be threatened or diluted by teachers reverting to earlier, more authoritarian modes of classroom management and lesson delivery’. It has also been noted that it is difficult to reform teacher education (Popkewitz 1987, Leclerq 1996, Cerych 1997), although ‘substantial innovations’ were successfully introduced in Hungary (Nagy 1998).

My own previous work (Owen-Jackson 2006) found that in Bosnia there was little change in teachers’ classroom practice following the political transition and civil war; many reverted to pre-war practice. Since then the Bosnian government has acknowledged that teaching remains ‘outdated’ and that university education for teachers is often ‘inadequate’ (Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2004).

Introduction

Education serves several purposes in modern society, one of which is socialising the young into that society through the transmission of cultural norms and values. However, there is debate over whether education should serve to perpetuate cultural values and norms or whether it is/can be an agent for change (Tisher and Wideen 1990).

In the political transition period in Eastern Europe, education was seen by many countries as a tool for modernising society, for example McLeish (2003, p.163) notes that ‘...the reform of existing educational practices be deemed a priority’. However, it is also claimed that many of these countries, despite the rhetoric of reform and the introduction of reforming legislation, have continued to maintain aspects of the ‘old system’ (Weiler et.al. 1996, Cerych 1997, Olek 1998).

The role of education in a post-war context is also important, Popkewitz (1991, p.13) considers ‘school reform’ to be one mechanism by which states attempt to achieve ‘cultural transformation and national solidarity’ and this is particularly important in newly-formed states. As Bush and Salterelli (2000) point out, though, education can have a negative effect on nation-building, as well as a positive one.

The literature suggests that educational change is instituted through political development and legislation, both of which have been problematic in the mixed Cantons in Bosnia. The political leaders in Bosnia appear to have used education in order to further the nationalist cause, and so have focused only on curriculum content – what the young are learning – and ensuring that this represents the nationalist, political view.

When educational reform is planned, it is teachers who are key to its successful implementation and in many countries across Europe teachers ‘...are now seen by many governments as the ‘lynchpin’ of educational, economic and social reform’ (Furlong et.al 2008, p.265). Successful implementation of planned reform often requires teachers to change their ‘... beliefs, skills and general perspective’ (Myron Atkin 2003, p.75) and it is acknowledged that this can be difficult to achieve (Fullan 2001, Levin 2001, Finnan and Lewin 2003).

If it is the case that teachers are central to successful reform, then teacher education is also central (DfEL/DoE 2010). However, reforms in teacher education also ‘...take place slowly and lag behind changes in other areas of education’ (Savova 1996, p. 38). My own previous work (Owen-Jackson 2006) found that in post-communist, post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina despite acknowledgement from the government that teaching was ‘out-dated’ and university education for teachers was often ‘inadequate’ (Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2004), there was little change in teachers’ classroom practice or teacher education.

The social and political context of education in Bosnia and Herzegovina

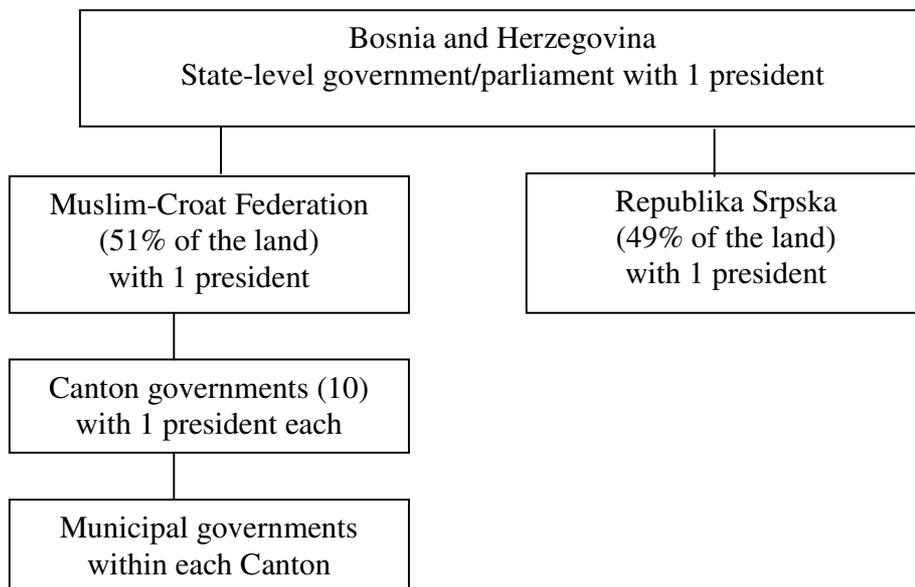
Following the fall of communism across Eastern Europe, in the early 1990s, much was written about educational reform in those countries moving from communist to more democratic forms of government (Weiler et.al 1996, Cerych 1997, Olek 1998).

The former Yugoslavia was part of this movement, but in Bosnia the political transition was dominated by nationalist power battles between the three major ethnic groups. It has been reported (Owen-Jackson 2006) that as early as 1990 schools in Bosnia were beginning to introduce nationalist teaching programmes.

These political battles led to civil war, which occurred 1992-95, between Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia. There is now a growing literature on education in areas of ‘instability’ (see Rappleye and Paulson 2007), but little work on areas experiencing multi-faceted change, such as that which occurred in Bosnia and which continues to be unresolved.

It is important to note that the conflict in Bosnia was ended through negotiations which involved the international community, and by the signing of the General Framework for Agreement for Peace (the Dayton Agreement). This Agreement created a complex governmental structure, see figure 1, which has had lasting impact on educational provision.

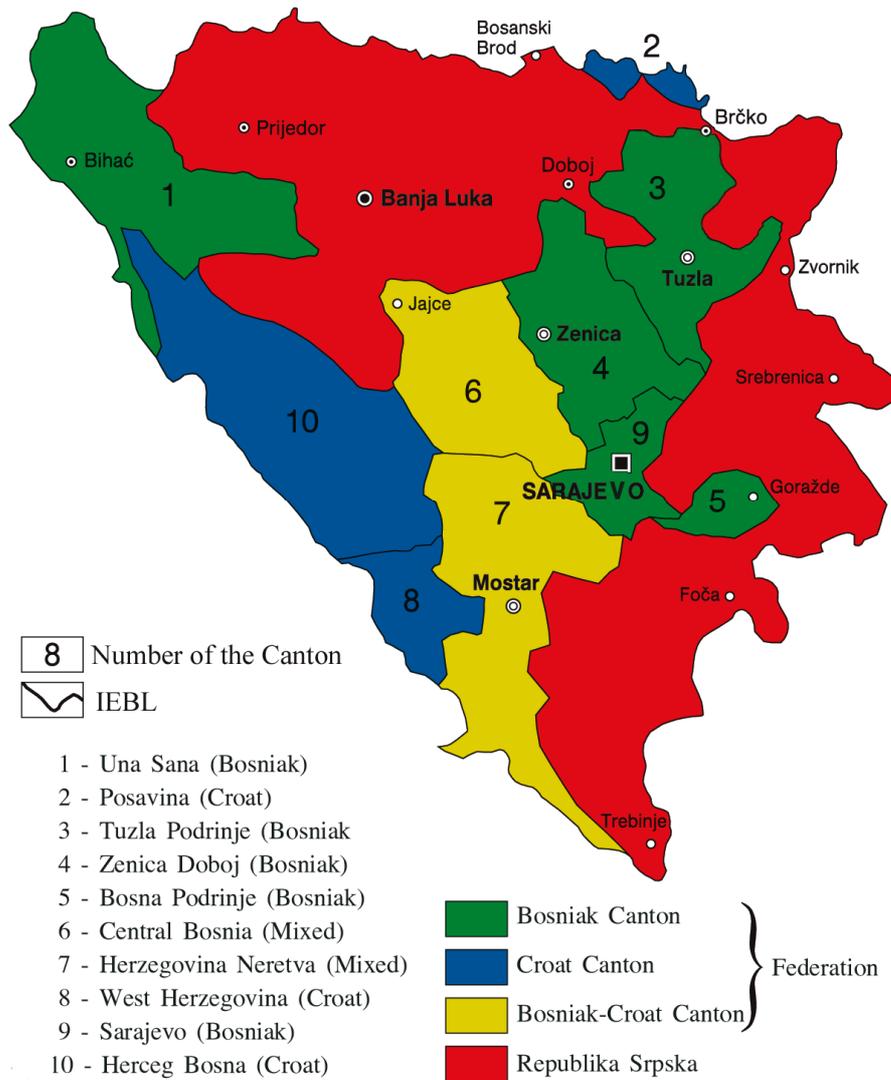
Figure 1 – the political structure of Bosnia, created by the Dayton Agreement



As a result of the Agreement there are now thirteen presidents within Bosnia – one at state level, two at Federation level and one within each Canton. The Cantons divide the land so that the majority of them have mono-ethnic majority populations, although two remain mixed, see figure 2.

Figure 2 – Cantons within Bosnia and Herzegovina

Federation of BiH



Education legislation and provision is designated as the responsibility of the Canton-level government, so that any state-level legislation requires ratification within each Canton before it becomes law. Each Canton is also able to pass its own laws relating to education (Owen-Jackson 2006). This has led to Bosnia having three, parallel, education systems. In Croat-majority areas the school curriculum originates in Croatia, in Bosniak areas it originates in Bosnia and in Republika Srpska it originates in Serbia. In 1997 the Federation Government gained the agreement of all the Canton Education Ministers to the production of a new, modern, Bosnian curriculum. This curriculum was introduced in

the school year 1999-2000, but was not taken up in Croat-majority Cantons or in West Mostar (OECD 2001).

Initially, most primary teachers continued to practice teacher-centred, didactic or 'frontal' teaching methods, teaching only the authorised programme from the state-issued textbook. Nor was there any change in teacher education practices. Various reasons can be suggested for this lack of change – inertia, conservatism, low pay, lack of status, satisfaction with the status quo (Owen-Jackson 2006).

The 'new' curriculum was later criticised for its 'traditional' approach to subjects, content and teaching methods (Federal Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport 2001; OECD 2001). In 2002 a report from an EU-funded project (Roeders and Stabback 2002) recommended a number of changes, including increasing primary education from eight years to nine years. In relation to teacher education, it recommended extending courses to four years for all and including a greater element of practice, as well as changes to content. This, with the agreement of all Canton Ministers of Education, became law in 2003 and each Canton was then required to implement it (although this was only done in the Bosnian-majority Cantons).

The international organisations were also involved in the introduction and implementation of the new curriculum. The 'managerial' training was provided by UNESCO/IBE (Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH 2004, p.11) and teachers' professional up-grading was co-ordinated by UNICEF (ibid, p.12).

This new research was designed to revisit these issues, to find out whether there had been any developments in educational provision and teacher education.

Recent research

My previous research was concluded in 2002 (Owen-Jackson 2006) and it seemed timely to return in 2009 to find out what further developments, if any, had taken place. The study carried out in 2009 was a qualitative study, the main research questions were:

- What is government policy in relation to primary teacher education, and how has this developed since 2002?
- How has government policy informed primary teacher practice?

The methods used included documentary analysis, with documents from the Bosnian government and international organisations, and interviews. I interviewed 7 teachers, 5 from East Mostar and 2 from West Mostar; their teaching experience varied from 5 years to 26 years, with four having been trained post-war and three pre-war. I also interviewed an educational official from the international organisation Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). I had intended to talk to university staff and government officials, but due to political disruption at the time of the visit this was not possible.

Mostar is a town divided between East (Bosnian) and West (Croatian) and with few Serbs living there. It is appropriate to conduct the research there because this situation mirrors in microcosm that which exists within the country as a whole, with the Bosniaks and Croats in an uneasy alliance in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serbs mostly living separately in Srpska Republika (see figure 2). Across East and West Mostar there are nine primary schools, with approximately 2,800 pupils in East Mostar and 4,740 in West Mostar.

Public policy can be embedded in ‘constitutions, legislative acts and judicial decisions’ (Schuster II, 2009) so documentary analysis was undertaken to look for government policy in relation to primary teacher education. This revealed that in 2007 the Federation government, again with the agreement of Cantons, passed a law which established an Agency for pre-school, primary and secondary education. The purpose of this Agency was to develop the common core curriculum, develop standards and play a quality assurance role. There was no legislation which directly related to teacher education, but it might be expected that educational legislation that related to primary education provision would impact on the requirements within teacher education.

Interviews revealed that the curriculum proposed by the Federation government in 2000, which included a common core curriculum and which had initially been rejected by the Education Minister in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, in which Mostar is located, finally gained approval in 2005. However, this was for the first four grades of primary school only (OSCE, personal communication 14.05.2009). And this curriculum is not fully embedded in the schools, there are still ‘language issues’ with the curriculum (ibid) and not all schools in West Mostar are implementing it.

This data would indicate that there had been developments in government policy in relation to primary education, although this was mostly at the instigation of the international organisations. These laws, however, were at Federation, not Canton, level and required the agreement and acceptance of Canton governments before they could be implemented.

There was no documentary evidence of reform in teacher education, although it is possible that intended curriculum reforms may have had some impact. Bosnia and Herzegovina signed the Bologna Declaration in September 2003 and this provided an incentive for reform in higher education which led to the Framework Law on Higher Education in December 2003. This was stalled in the political process (Croatian politicians voted against it) and so failed to become legislation.

When teachers were asked if they were aware of any government (Federation or Canton level) policy on primary education, only one responded that she didn’t know. All of the others referred to the introduction of the nine-year curriculum, but with differing levels of knowledge about this. There responses to the new curriculum varied

‘the Federal Ministry imposed the new curriculum, but each Canton made their own changes, there are still three versions of the plan and program’ (TE1)

'there are still lots of units from the old curriculum, and it is still too wide, there is much there that is unnecessary for life' (TE2)

'the new curriculum and new methodology concentrate on the child, the child is no longer passive' (TE3)

'the new curriculum is still 'in diapers', no-one knows what the pupils will be like when they have finished, will they be any good. There hasn't been much change to the curriculum content ... it is a more modern way of teaching' (TE5)

'the government are involved 'but invisible', the Minister is an economist so has no experience or knowledge of schools ... is only interested in finances' (TW1)

My second area of interest was whether changes to government policy had changed teachers' classroom practice. In 2004, the Ministry of Civil Affairs published a document on educational developments which stated that the government would ensure that 'all teachers receive training in modern teaching methodologies within four years (2003-2006)' (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2004). Whilst there is some evidence that practice is slowly beginning to change, it would seem that the government is still some way from meeting this aim.

The teachers in West Mostar reported that there were meetings of teachers and the Advisor at the beginning of each school year, at which they discussed the curriculum and new teaching methods. These teachers, however, did not report changes to their own practice.

The teachers in East Mostar reported a range of training experiences over the previous five years, including:

- In-school seminars and meetings with other teachers
- Zavod seminars and workshops
- An 8-day course, writing and reading to critical thinking (the school had paid for this teacher, and several others, to attend the course but the teachers had to pay to obtain the certificate)

The OSCE official reported that most teachers liked the new curriculum, but mainly for pragmatic reasons as the extension to a nine-year curriculum would bring more jobs. He said that they 'accepted' the new methodology.

The teachers own responses to the changed methodology varied. The teachers in West Mostar reported little or no change, they continued to use frontal teaching methods only. However, some of the teachers in East Mostar did report changes in their methods; two of them talked with enthusiasm about changes to their classroom practice. These two teachers had been trained pre-war and were experienced, with 20 years and 26 years in the classroom. They both reported using pair work and group work, one also said she

used games, practical work and 'outside work' (TE3). Of the younger teachers, trained post-war, only one said that the pupils worked in pairs or groups on some tasks. Another said that he used pairs or groups where possible but that planning for this was often difficult and he mostly used 'frontal teaching' (TE5).

When asked about teacher education, there seemed to be little difference between the experiences of the teachers, irrespective of when and where they had been trained. The teachers trained pre-war had undergone a two-year course at the Pedagogoska Akademia, whilst those trained post-war had undergone a four-year course at a university. However, there seemed to be little difference in the content of the training and they all reported that their own training had been didactic, with too much theory and insufficient classroom practice.

All the teachers in East and West Mostar felt that teacher education remained outdated and did not properly prepare students for teaching. Comments included:

'it should be more up to date and include more practice' (TW1)

'it's out of date, they teach too much theory and students only learn how to teach frontally' (TE4)

'the professors are old, there are no young ones, and the quality is poor, change is needed' (TE1)

The OSCE official described the universities as 'dysfunctional'; they are autonomous from government but the Faculties are linked to political parties (personal communication, 14.05.2009). University staff, he claims, position themselves politically and follow their party line, which makes it difficult to introduce changes in teacher education in line with the school curriculum.

This political influence is also felt in schools. Some school Director posts are filled by political appointment, not necessarily the best person, meaning that some Directors are 'incompetent' (OSCE, personal communication 14.05.2009). This also applies to teachers; one of the teachers in East Mostar, with six years teaching experience, reported having failed to obtain a post in a school in which she had been working because she didn't know anyone who could 'present' her. The post had gone to a student straight from college, who 'had connections' (TE5). This experience is supported by a statement on the OSCE website, which states that public appointments, including those within education, are still politically driven (OSCE 2010).

In summary, there was evidence that government policy in relation to primary education is beginning to change but this is slow and piecemeal. The Federation government have made attempts to introduce modernising legislation but it is up to each Canton to decide when, or whether, to implement this.

The evidence also indicates that education policy is still very much influenced by party politics. In mono-ethnic Cantons the education provision meets the needs of the majority population, i.e. Bosnian curriculum in Bosniak-majority Cantons and Croatian curriculum in Croat-majority Cantons. In those Cantons with mixed populations (which includes Herzegovina-Neretva) there remains political wrangling. The OSCE official confirmed that, although in theory there is one Minister of Education for all of Mostar there are areas where he is not accepted (due to ethnic differences). And one teacher commented that *'Officially there is one Minister and one area, but unofficially there are two'* (TE1).

The teachers I spoke to were all aware of the new curriculum and the new methodology. In East Mostar there was some evidence of professional development training for teachers, although provision and take-up varied, and some teachers were changing their classroom practice. The change is slow, but five years ago all the teachers I talked to used frontal teaching only so there is some change.

It would seem, though, that the impetus for change is coming from the international organisations and charitable groups working in the country, not from government. And it is individual schools and individual teachers who are changing, there does not appear to be any large-scale reform.

Within the universities there appears to be no change at all. Student teachers are being prepared in the same way that they always have, albeit for the new curriculum content. There does not appear to be any support or encouragement, from government or the international organisations, for the universities to provide training in the new teaching methods, both for pre-service and as in-service courses.

Discussion and conclusion

In many countries in Eastern Europe the transition from communism to democratic government led to changes in educational provision and practice, with a move away from the teaching of communist ideology and teacher-led practice to a broader curriculum and modern teaching methods. Educational reform was used to embed political, social and cultural change.

In Bosnia, educational reform has been of a different kind. Party politics continues to play a large part in educational decisions, or in the lack of decision-making. This means that in Mostar, which has only nine primary schools, there are two universities providing teacher education, two pedagogical institutes, school inspectors work in pairs, one Bosnian and one Croatian, and the schools in the East provide a Bosnian curriculum whilst those in the West provide a Croatian one.

The content of the curriculum has been described as the 'battleground of competing ideologies' (Moyle and Hargreaves 1998, p.28) and this has proved to be the case in Bosnia. The content of some subjects, particularly language, history, geography and religion, is based on the nationalist political agenda, presenting young people with different perspectives and are entrenching differences rather than ameliorating them.

Despite some attempts to modernise the curriculum, for example two teachers had attended a course on 'Writing and Reading to Critical Thinking', there was no evidence of change in the taught curriculum which is legislated by government.

There was some evidence, however, that some teachers would welcome reform of teaching methods, and are beginning to change their own practice, but this is not widespread and has little government support. Although much of the literature on implementing change indicates that the 'top-down' approach is rarely successful (Zeicher and Ndimande 2008, Rust & Freidus 2001) because teachers find it threatening Elliott (1991) many teachers in Bosnia, because of their own background and training, recognise only 'top down' authority as legitimate. In this circumstance, government-led reform is likely to be needed if reform is to be successfully implemented.

Teacher education also appears to be heavily influenced by politics which is hindering change in this arena.

This lack of change in Bosnia is important as it will have consequences on the political, economic and social development of the country. There are nationalist politicians at every level of government fiercely pursuing the nationalist political agenda, further hindering change. Elections in October 2010 may change this situation but this is unlikely. Unemployment levels are high, estimated at 40%, (CIA 2010) and social divisions still exist.

Education cannot, of course, bring change to all these aspects of Bosnian life but it can contribute to improving employment opportunities, reducing social tensions and helping to modernise the country. But it is a circular argument, education cannot change without the political will to do so and politics in Bosnia will not change without a change in the education system. It is difficult to see what the future holds.

Bush and Salterelli (2000) concluded that, in times of instability, education has the ability to act either as a positive force, promoting peace and stability, or a negative one, promoting inequality, prejudice and conflict. It would seem that in Bosnia the latter is the case.

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