INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA: AN ARRENA OF CONFLICTING NARRATIVES

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Abstract: The primary focus of this paper is placed on education in the multicultural context of the Republic of Macedonia. This paper focuses on higher education in the country, and the level of implementation of requirements brought about by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA). The higher education circumstances are also brought into correlation with the educational aspects at both primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Macedonia. In the country, "mixed" schools are perceived as arenas with more frequent interethnic conflicts and higher level of stereotypes and prejudices. Teachers, parents and even pupils are ambivalent when it comes to direct contact. They believe that interaction is a source of interethnic tensions and conflicts with ethnic dimension. Yet at the same time, they are aware that interaction is the best way for pupils to get to know each other and learn to function together. Examples from the author's experience in working on several projects regarding interethnic integration in education and intercultural competence will be used in the discussion of the subject matter. Additionally, this work will look at the legal frame referring to the education in Macedonia and see how it organizes the objectives and outcomes in respect to some general values, such as cultural diversity, creativity, democratization of culture.

Keywords: intercultural competence; diversity; culturally responsive teaching; intercultural curriculum

1. INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL PARADIGMS

1.1. Background and theoretical paradigms. In any society, educational system is closely related to societal needs because of the symbiotic relationship that exists between them. Educational system in a country is shaped by the political, economic and cultural-ideological sphere that make up its environments. Population changes, demographics, languages in the society, technological advances, and social movements are some of the environmental factors that influence the functions of education. Educational institutions are places where socially constructed attitudes towards other ethnic groups are either formed or reassessed and its values are in a way shaping the ethnic interaction. When discussing essential components of coexistence of different communities two notions are indispensable: multiculturalism and interculturalism.

Multiculturalism emphases the cultural diversity in which the priority is placed on the preservation of one's own cultural identity and acceptance of the other's and/or developing tolerance towards it. Interculturalism, implies dynamic process of building relations between different cultures and „sharing cultural expressions via dialogue and mutual respect (Beska *et al.,* 2006:17). Hence, interculturalism implies multiculturalism and at the same time it represents its upgrading and strengthening: parallel living side by side should be directed towards mutual interaction with each other and connection with one another. When performed in plural ethnic, linguistic, religious and socio-economic environment, education should be directed towards developing intercultural skills, values and attitudes of all participants in the educational process, thus finding the optimum ratio between cultural diversity and social cohesion.

The Intercultural component in education is crucial in the Republic of Macedonia[1] in which the coexistence of different cultures representatives

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[1] The Republic of Macedonia is a multicultural state that recognizes all the members of different ethnicities by its Constitution. According to the latest census of 2002, the population consists of: *64.2% Macedonians; 25.2% Albanians; 3.9% Turks; 1.9% Serbs; 2.7% Roma people; 0.8% Boshnaks.*

has deep historical roots, whereas the inclusiveness and integration in education are indispensable for building long-lasting sustainable society. One particular research (Gurin *et al*., 2002) identified three ways of exposing students to diversity in institutions of higher education: structural diversity, informal interactional diversity, and classroom diversity (Figure 1).

Fig.1 Diversity in Higher Education Institutions

They define structural diversity as the numerical representation of ethnic students' groups in a University, which is conceptualized as an essential but insufficient ingredient for meaningful inter-group interaction. This component in the case of Macedonia is reflected in the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) principle of equitable representation of the students and the academic staff.[2] Classroom diversity, on the other hand, is contained within the structure of a course and includes content, knowledge about diverse groups of people and interracial interaction with classroom peers. This implies an approach were policy makers are giving special attention to the topics of multiculturalism, interculturalism and diversity in their curricula. Gurin *et al.* (2002) further propose that informal inter-group contact and classroom diversity will likely confer the greatest benefit of ethnic diversity on students' educational gains and civic development.

Thus, this theory supports the argument that an ethnically diverse university significantly enhances students' intellectual development in several ways: openness and understanding of diversity, higher levels of academic development, increased intellectual engagement, and enhanced critical thinking and intellectual self-concept. These findings not only suggest that exposure and interaction with diverse peers are educationally significant, but they also support a well-established

premise regarding students' development, that is, that interpersonal interaction with peers is one of the most powerful educational resources in higher education (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1995). Having in mind the above mentioned propositions, it is feasible at this stage of reforms of Higher Education (hereinafter HE) to assess the institutional approaches and readiness of the Universities (including primary and secondary schools) in the Republic of Macedonia to address the issue of diversity, multiculturalism and interculturalism.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Overview of methodology. From the methodological aspect, the analysis largely focused on the use of normative and comparative methods, especially in the part were the existing legal framework and policy documents are analyzed. At this stage it is important to analyze the content of the relevant legal norms in the domestic legislature and practices in a variety of Universities in the Republic of Macedonia. It must be noted however, that in many areas there is a lack of information about this issues. The analysis was conducted on the basis of an inclusive and consultative process with relevant stakeholders. The methodology includes the following instruments: (1) desk research was one of the essential instruments for analysis as the basis on which the capacity of higher education to implement *de facto* the norms provided by the legislation is assessed; (2) questionnaire conducted with lecturers from State Universities, SEEU, Policy makers and University managers; (3) focus groups with Albanian and Macedonian students from the SEEU.

Additionally, reports from several projects, in particularly the USAID Intercultural Integration in Education Project (IIEP) in the Republic of Macedonia carried out by the Macedonian Center for Civic Education are also used to shed light on this complex issue at the level of primary and secondary education.

3. LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK IN EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

3.1. The language battle. In this part of the paper we will focus on the legislative and policy framework regarding language of instruction in education with a special focus on the higher education institutions in the country. This is due to the fact that the opportunity to educate oneself in one's mother tongue from primary school to

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[2] In 2001 The Republic of Macedonia was struck by an ethnic conflict, which brought an 8 month unrest in the region. The conflict expressed the grievances of the Albanian community as a marginalized group within the country, the aim being to improve its participation in the society. The signing of OFA in August 2001, put an end to the above-mentioned conflict and introduced formal mechanisms for resolution of conflicts on national and local level.

university level has been a burning issue in the country for several years, especially with regards to the Albanians which constitute the second largest ethnic group. As such, this issues constitutes the backbone of multicultural education in the country. At the general level of education, the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia guarantees the right of education in one's mother tongue in the primary and secondary school level.[3] OFA however, has brought dramatic changes at the level of higher education by requesting with article 6.2 that "State funding will be provided for university level education in languages spoken by at least 20 percent of the population of Macedonia, on the basis of specific agreements." The process of introduction of the right of use of mother tongue for non-majority communities in HE institutions was one of the corner stones of the heated political debates since the independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991. This has also triggered the need for the opening of a University where Albanian will be the primary language of instruction. We can distinguish between two periods of development of the policies on language-use in HE in Macedonia:

-   The first period runs from 1991 to 2001 and is characterized by a policy of monolingual HE model with Macedonian being the primary language of instruction primarily and a limited use for minority languages in HE institutions.

-   The second period from 2001 onwards which implies incorporation of the OFA principles in the legislative framework and is marked by the use of other languages (Albanian) in HE settings due to the constant demands of the Albanian population for utilization of the Albanian language in tertiary education. (Muhic and Memeti, 2016).

The legislative framework in the time frame following the independence of the country (1991-1998) guaranteed non-majority community language instruction in primary and secondary education. However, despite strong demands from the representatives of the Albanian political parties HE was not open for languages of the non-majority communities until 1997. The changes came with the Law on Languages at the Faculty of Pedagogy "St. Clement of Ohrid" in Skopje.[4] This was the first law which stipulated the principle of multiculturalism and language diversity in HE, by

prescribing the possibility that other languages beside the Macedonian language can be language of instruction HE institutions. This Law sanctioned the right of the students who were studying in programs at the Pedagogical Faculty aimed at training of teachers for pre-school, primary and secondary education to study in language of the non-majority communities in the Republic of Macedonia. The Law stipulated a form of conditionality were in order to activate such programs a minimum of 20 students belonging to certain non-majority community has to enroll. These provisions were later included in a special Law on Higher Education adopted in the year 2000. According to the Albanian population in the country, this simply confirmed the monolingual model of instruction in the HE institutions and caused additional grievances, which came from the fact that the teaching in the mother tongue was limited strictly to the Pedagogical Faculty in Skopje.

In the year 2000 with the initiative of the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities a new Law on Higher Education introduced several novelties in the area of introduction of the languages of the non-majority communities in higher education. Namely, it stipulated the possibility for founding of universities without state finance where Albanian language would be the main language of instruction. In addition, the Law created the new institution, the Board of Accreditation responsible for accreditation and evaluation of University programs. As a direct result of this law, in 2001 the South-East European University was founded as a private, non-profit University with five department with a flexible use of language of instruction Albanian/ Macedonian/ English depending on the number of enrolled candidates in a specific program.

4. INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION CONCEPT

4.1. Declarative aspects vs the real picture. On January 14, 2016 the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Macedonia officially accepted the newly developed Concept for Intercultural Education as an official document of MoES. The Concept was drafted by an expert group established by the organization Nansen Dialogue Center (NDC) Skopje in partnership with the Ministry for Education and science and the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Norway. The concept for intercultural education is based on the research of the current situation and conditions in many mono-

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[3] Paragraph 3, Article 48 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia

[4] Law on Languages in which studies are held at the Faculty of Pedagogy "St. Clement of Ohrid" in Skopje, (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia 5/1997)

ethnic and multi-ethnic schools in rural and urban environments in R.M. with the goal of perceiving the intercultural dimension in primary and secondary education. This Concept offers approaches, positive practices and experiences for cross curricular support of intercultural values through the official and hidden curriculum. Even though this document focuses only on primary and secondary education and does not imply responsibility for HE institutions it is still a highly important document because the role of these institutions is essential through building pupil competences in multiculturalism and diversity as future students and members of the society as well as for the application of similar mechanisms in higher education settings.

The Policy paper aimed at initiating government strategy towards integrated education system entitled Steps towards Integrated Education in the Republic of Macedonia, prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science with the support of the OSCE Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities emphasized the need to overcome the ethnic alienation and encouraging interaction between all stakeholders in the educational process. Greatly a result of this endeavor as well as the overall atmosphere in the country and the aim to fulfill the principles agreed upon in the OFA, the concept of interethnic education has been introduced in certain programs within the Pedagogical Faculties throughout the country. Courses ranging from Comparative Religious Systems, Basics of Democracy, through Ethics and on to multiculturalism have been offered at most State and some private Universities in the country. We would like to underline that in all those cases, the courses directly dealing with or involving the term Multiculturalism are without exception elective courses, while the majority of the other above-mentioned courses are core courses within which the professors bring in topics of diversity, intercultural competencies, conflict resolution, stereotypes, etc.

In terms of the survey and interviews we have conducted with staff from both private and state Universities in the country, aiming to see what kind of practices are implemented by higher education institutions regarding the curriculum, professional development of teachers, and education materials, some of the more interesting results were the following ones. Although throughout this research we have concluded that those universities which have a course in multiculturalism offer it without exceptions at an elective level, professors have generally given confirmative answers regarding their attempt to

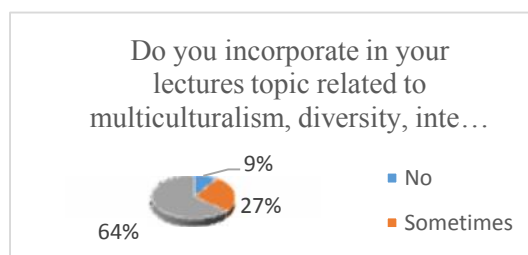incorporate topics of diversity and intercultural cooperation in their classes.

Fig.2 Results

From the 35 respondents from both private and public universities in the country and representing most ethnic groups we have received the following results (Figure 2).

This set of answers leaves a far more optimistic picture as per the developments in higher education by showing that most universities do incorporate themes of multi/intercultural cooperation and diversity, thus discussing sensitive topics and raising the awareness among students from predominantly Teacher Training/Pedagogical Faculties, i.e. those who will be able to transmit the massage further in their multicultural classrooms. This is however also a sign that class discussions pertaining to the plethora of these complex issues is almost always unstructured and never a part of the core course. In other words, bringing these issues in the lectures is usually a result of teachers' dedication and willingness to put forward such topics in from of the students.

In our interviews with decision makers, we managed to discuss several items with the former Rector from the State University in Bitola and Pro-Dean at FPAPS from SEEU. The former representative has confirmed his believe in the power of OFA to allow equal representation of other ethnic groups in higher education as well as equality in the use of languages. However, an alarming issue is raised in the response that the majority of the University staff does not fully comprehend the concept of intercultural competencies, an issue that was also brought up to the surface during my engagement in the Project for Interethnic Integration carried out across all educational levels in the Republic of Macedonia. Two focus groups were conducted one were language of instruction is Albanian and one were language of instruction is Macedonian at SEEU. In both groups there was positive attitude regarding initiatives for knowing each other. They were keen to have more courses such English were joint groups are created and had a chance to interact. In parallel, they are willing to be exposed through

curricula to the topics of multiculturalism, diversity and interculturalism.

The circumstances at the elementary and high school level however, point to the still existing and burning issues regarding intercultural competencies of teachers and the developments of these qualities among the student population as well. One of the major problems is the division among ethnic/language lines, which results in the majority of schools being segregated. Although mixed school do exist in the country, students of different ethnicities (primarily Macedonian/ Albanian) attend classes in different shifts or are separated in different buildings. The percentage of these mixed schools is also rather low compared to the monocultural school environments. Hence, there are 26% of primary schools (age 6-14) (Macedonian / Albanian / Turkish / Serbian) that is 86 out of 332, and 30% of secondary schools (age 15-18) (Macedonian /Albanian / Turkish) that is, 29 out of 99. During the execution of the 5 year USAID project on Interethnic Integration in Education administered by the Macedonian Center for Civic Education some of the initial findings from the field were that the mixed schools are predominantly perceived as arenas with more frequent interethnic conflicts and higher level of stereotypes and prejudices. Although aware that interaction is the best way for pupils to get to know each other and learn to function together, teachers, parents and even pupils are ambivalent when it comes to direct contact fearing it to be the trigger for possible interethnic tensions. Having this in mind, the IIEP project took serious initiatives in including the state educational institutions on a mission to an improved, inter ethnically integrated education in the country, including the Ministry of Education and Science, the Bureau for Development of Education, the Center for Vocational Education and Training, the State Education Inspectorate, as well as the teachers, administrative staff, local municipalities and parents.

One of the major problems in implementing culturally responsive teaching in the classroom is the lack of properly educated staff that already suffers from stereotypes and bias or lack of knowledge as per the implementation of topics that deal with the issue of intercultural communication and diversity. To this end, among some of the bigger contributions that came out of the IIEP project are the several manuals and practicums, especially the one on Integration of Multicultural Learning in Primary and Secondary Education. The main objective of the IIEP is to help the primary and the secondary schools to implement activities that develop the interethnic integration in education

(IIE) values of the students. This means that the teachers have clear guidelines on how to approach and discuss these sensitive topics, while the students have the opportunity to gain the competencies they need for a life in a multiethnic society, in the spirit of mutual understanding, peace, respect for others, and acceptance of differences and right to equality for all.

4.2. Conflicting narratives. Yet, two decades after some of the major reforms took place in the educational system in the country, there are still many conflicting narratives. The Macedonian side argues that a lot has been done to provide equity in education, yet the Albanians still argue that certain major issues have not been tackled or else they have been only superficially treated. The financial discrimination, the lack of Albanian classrooms and the fact that the existing ones are overcrowded as well as the numerous typological and contextual mistakes in the schools books are only part of the problem emphasized by Albanian professors and the foreign Minister of Education. Albanian professors argue that the discriminatory politics are not over yet and that the multicultural premises in the country including the education, are predominantly declarative. In other words, they believe that there are a number of obstacles towards the realization of everyone's right to study in their own language. Some Albanian professors argue that in Skopje for instance, in the municipalities predominantly inhabited by the Macedonian population, Albanian professors are not hired, and the infrastructural conditions are far from perfect (Bajrami, 2017).

One of the most troublesome arena of conflicts came about with the *Strategy for Integrated Education in the Republic of Macedonia,* a document drafted in 2008 by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Macedonia and a direct result of the recommendations of the OBSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities. One of the main pillars of this strategy was the learning of the Macedonian language and the languages of the other ethnicities in the country. The primary recommendation was that all other ethnicities should start learning Macedonian in elementary school as early as possible and before the 4th grade of studies when Macedonian becomes compulsory, while the Macedonian children should learn at least one language of the other ethnicities living in the country on elective level. The strategy remained a sheer document that did not see the realization of its full potential, greatly due to the political manipulations of its content.

5. CONCLUSION

It is evident that there is a gentle balance between promoting diversity and encouraging integration among different communities through national education policy in the country. Through its education policy, the role of the policymakers is to provide opportunities for different groups to maintain aspects of their culture while building a society in which different communities are structurally included and to which they feel some degree belonging. The primary and secondary education in the country suffers from segregation and lack of extracurricular activities that can bring pupils together. Above all, the sensitive themes pertaining to history are not harmonized, thus exposing the pupils of different ethnic groups to different narratives. Additionally, higher education institutions are the nucleus of the community and are the central agents of socialization and social cohesion. Universities in the Republic of Macedonia can be an important channel through which to promote social cohesion and address community issues of inter-cultural, inter-religious, or inter-ethnic relations. Thus, if education policy is not sensitive to the issue of social cohesion and does not incorporate the perspectives of variety of communities, it can divide and alienate the non-majority communities in the country.

Moreover, there are still disagreements both among the general population and among the political parties in the country as per the interpretation and success of the implementation of OFA. That said, OFA specifies merely three items pertaining to higher education. These refer to uniform standards for academic programs, state funding for university level education in languages spoken by at least 20 percent of the population of Macedonia, and the principle of positive discrimination in the enrolment in state universities. While the latter two items have been fulfilled to a great extent, the first one referring to uniform standards in academic programs is still not fully implemented. This problem, as noted earlier, exists in the primary and secondary education as well.

The status of language of instruction in HE is an important component that can affect both the learning and the achievement of the students and thus have an impact on the quality of educational opportunities including equity on the labor market. In the Macedonian model after the independence HE was offered only in Macedonian language. It took more than 10 years to permit education in languages other than Macedonian. While this concession satisfied the demand for mother tongue education in Albanian language it did not account for difficulties that communities less than 20 % have in enrolling and attaining success due to fact that they, with an exception to the primary and secondary education, are not allowed to continue their education in their mother tongue. With regards to offering a revised, culturally sensitive curricula, we have noted that most of the state Universities in the country, including SEEU as a private-public enterprise do introduce topics of multiculturalism, interculturalism, diversity, stereotypes, prejudices and conflict resolutions in their subjects (though predominantly at the Teacher Training/Pedagogical Faculties). Those universities which offer a course specifically called Multiculturalism or Multicultural education do so only at an elective level and never offer it as a core course.

Most of the interviewed professors have confirmed that they do incorporate interethnic theme in their classes even if these are not directly tied to that subject area. Most of the University staff interviewed for this research agree with the importance and positive strength of OFA in enabling the use of mother tongue in higher education. However, those who expressed their disagreement mainly diagnose the problem in the still undefined status of the Albanian language in the country, the Laws pertaining to accreditation, which they argue, are still predominantly in Albanian and the solely normative level at which things are being fulfilled without any practical application. Additionally, there is an almost equal split between staff who went on certain professional training regarding intercultural sensitization and those who have not had such an opportunity. This highlights the need of increasing such trainings and making them part of the professional development of the university staff instead of letting it be a merely private decision for someone's additional training in the field of intercultural competencies.

Finally, we have noticed that most of the time lecturers confirm that the way in which they introduce topic of diversity and intercultural values is through talking about different cultures, traditions and holidays. This, runs the risk of having a shallow understanding of cultures combined with the notions that cultures are not dynamic, but rather fixed, unchangeable phenomena which do not transform nor develop. The Four Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content developed by Banks and Banks clearly discusses this problem. This particular approach to a curriculum transformation would be what Banks and Banks (2010) call the contribution approach. Such an approach, they argue

often results in the trivialization of ethnic cultures, the study of their strange and exotic characteristics, and the reinforcement of stereotypes and Misconceptions (2010:240).

Moreover, this approach also tends to focus on the *lifestyles* of ethnic groups rather than on the *institutional structures*, such as racism and discrimination, that significantly affect their life chances and keep them powerless and marginalized (Banks and Banks, 2010:240). A different approach to diversity through debates and discussions on various daily phenomena in the world might be a better approach to treating these issues and sensitizing the students.

From the analysis we can conclude that there is a need for training of the teaching staff regarding some key topics such as intercultural communication skills, cultural sensitivities, history of different ethnic groups in society, etc. A lecturer who is well-trained in these issues can end up being very helpful in maintaining harmony among the different ethnicities in the classroom and University setting as well as in the community. Such training can be easily obtained in short term courses, programs or workshops organized by the Ministry of Education and other relevant institutions. Additionally, activating systematic changes at the University curriculum level, and introducing courses which deal with issues of interculturalism at a core level is a necessary future step. It must be noted however, that the parallel system of education enabled by the laws in the country, is bringing new generation of lecturers who have rarely interacted with peers from different ethnic community. This is a system deficiency which requires on the part of the educational institutions a more serious engagement in enhancing the intercultural skills of the future teachers through trainings and through instructing them as per how to deal with the issues of diversity and the topics of interculturalism in the classroom.

And while a number of issues remain to be tackled, as educators, we must remain alert and aware, that multicultural education must help all students, especially those of the so-called marginalized groups or sub-state nationalities in achieving and experiencing academic success. This in itself would not count as sufficient, unless in the process, students were also taught how to develop skills and attitudes needed for positive interaction free of biases and stereotypes. Educating students

in this manner is of utmost importance for bridging the already existent gaps in today's polarized world.

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