

The Challenges in the Process of Decentralization of Education

Case study : Macedonia's Current Education System Versus the Requirements of the Albanian Community.

by Agim Poshka, PhD

Macedonia is living its "Euro-integration" drama for over two decades. It had its pick moments but this rare momentum's seems to be far from the overall expectations of its residents. One element that seems to be largely in focus in the last few years is the distinctive measures to reform education. These reforms had two main driving engines: the first one was as part of the modernization of the system in bringing considerable amount of equipment in the public schools, and the second dealt with the process of decentralization of education as one of the pillars of the Ohrid Framework agreement. This paper aims to share some perspectives regarding the process of decentralization of education and how it is impacting the public educational service entirely although it was a requirement of the Albanian community only.

The World Bank Institute (1999) indicates that the attempts for a decentralized education in Hungary had begun in 1970, in Czechoslovakia in 1987 and in Albania in 1992. Unfortunately, Macedonia still remains the most centralized country in the region and it remained the same until year 2004 when decentralization became an legislative issue, as a result of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001.

This paper includes the main developments in the process of the decentralization of education, after 2001 by referring to international reports and decisions of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia.

The needs of having a decentralized education are as follows:

1. More efficient management of the educational infrastructure;
2. More privileges and responsibilities for the local government as being more familiar with the educational needs of the local population;
3. Depolitization of the process in order to gain the trust of non-majority communities.

One of the first developments about this issue was that the decentralization process did not recognize only the direct delegation of competences from the central to local government, but engaged the school councils as well as a third party in this process. According to the developmental plan of the Ministry of Education in 2004, the decentralization and transfer of competences was supposed to be carried out in two phases. The first phase analyzed the development of municipalities and the management of the educational process in primary schools and later in secondary schools in terms of goods and services (not salaries). After this phase was supervised by the international and the local factors, the most successful municipalities went then on to the second phase of decentralization. In the first official international report on decentralization(USAID,2007), there were certain difficulties reported in this process, such as:

1. minimal enthusiasm by the current government about the implementation of the process;
2. suspicious population;
3. the fact that 70% of mayors are new in their positions.

Before we analyze the difficulties that the local authorities faced within this process, it is important to recall the challenges that the Ministry of Education and Science in Macedonia was facing at the time:

1. The need for formulating a legal reality which exactly described the competences of every unit that was a result of the decentralization of education;
2. The need for creating a common database about the number of pupils, staff, funds that schools get from the state budget (because until 2004 there were different databases used).

In order to better manage the new reality, the Ministry of Education established two units: the legal issues unit and the analytical unit. The urgent challenge for the development of this process has to do with the fact that only in its primary education Macedonia had about 340 primary schools that functioned as individual administrative units and therefore the centralized management created the “Black Box” effect which meant that only educational units or school principals that were “closer” to the management of the Ministry of Education could gain privileges or adequate support. The Albanian political factor has always been suspected on the sincerity and the ways of allocation of these budget means, since there were some arguments that before 2004 the calculation of endowments for one pupil in Skopje was multiple times higher than of those in peripheral schools in Macedonia, especially Albanian ones. An important role in the process was played by the USAID and more specifically with the engagement of Jan Herczy ski, an expert, consultant and compiler of more than 50 international reports on decentralization in Poland, Romania, Albania, Ukraine, etc. In the report of Open Society Institute (Bishop, 2009), Macedonia is named as an absolutely centralized country until 2001. Also, the imbalance between some Albanian and Macedonian schools is pointed out, especially in terms of working in two or more shifts in some of the Albanian schools.

As mentioned earlier, in order to have better decentralization efficiency, the process was split into two phases. The first phase planned a limited delegation of competences related to maintenance, reparations, and goods (excluding the teachers’ salaries); the second phase was planned for the period between 2007 and 2009 and it would extend the local authority competences over the education.

The legal framework and new competences of local authorities

Initiated after the agreement signed in Ohrid in August 2001, the process of the decentralization of education started legal reforms in 2002 with the adoption of the law on self-government and associated with the Law on Financing the Local Self-government in 2004, amendments on the Law on primary and secondary education, the Law on the New Territorial Division and the territorial redefinition of the municipalities upon which there were 85 municipalities remaining out of 128. Based on the set criteria, about 50 municipalities in Macedonia entered the second phase.

According to the book of rules, the competences for managing with schools and appointing the principals belonged to both parties: the municipal council and the parents’ councils in schools. The school council which was also known as parents’ council had now competences to even change the school status and its budget. One of the criteria was that school principals were supposed to get special licenses for holding that position.

The partnership between school councils and mayors in proposing and then appointing principals or managers, budgets, and the statutes of educational institutions was expected to improve the quality in education in the following terms:

1. By being part of the community both parties have better understanding of the problems these institutions are facing in contrast the former practices when the Ministry of Education decided upon every issue;
2. The possibility of creating the feeling of trust in local leaders due to the minimization of the political impact by the central government.

Unfortunately, part of these criteria hasn't proved to be efficient even ten years after the endorsement of the Ohrid Agreement. In the study of People Centered Analyses¹ in which 1,200 families were surveyed overall Macedonia, though most of them are in favor of the decentralization process, they responded as follows to the question who they would trust more in terms of managing the educational, social, healthcare and other public services:

Who do you consider would do the best job in providing the service?

Proportion of respondents who wish service to be provided by:	Education services	Services for the elderly	Services for children	Services for the disabled
Central government	69%	61%	63%	69%
Local government	28%	32%	30%	23%
Private providers	2%	2%	2%	2%
NGOs	1%	5%	5%	6%

(Source: People Centred Analyses report 2009, Table 6)

According to the chart, it is clear that 69% of the surveyed consider that these processes should be managed by the central government. This piece of information, though contradictory, reflects low understanding of the process of decentralization from its citizens and its possible advantages in the education system in Macedonia.

The defects in the education system that resisted the decentralization process

- The framework for multicultural education

In order to have an efficient and sincere implementation of the decentralization process, we should take into consideration the cultural aspect and the multicultural reality in which Macedonia exists. In international programs the need for multicultural education is quite evident and referred to, since it synthesizes tendencies in four dimensions which are necessary for the development of multicultural education:

1. Curriculum Reform (historical inquiry, detecting bias in texts, media, and educational materials, curriculum theory);
2. Multicultural Competence (ethnic group, culture, prejudice reduction, and ethnic identity development);
3. Equity Pedagogy (school and classroom climates, students achievement, cultural styles in teaching and learning);
4. Societal equity (social action, demographics, culture and race in popular culture)

1. Curriculum reforms and the lack of materials and methods to promote new curriculum developmental approaches

The current curricula in the education system in Macedonia have failed in encouraging the mutual understanding and equality among various ethnic groups in public schools. Even though most of the ethnic groups in a society can have similar goals, such as creating educative values that would help the prosperity of the society, some of them face obstacles and discrepancies in educational practices which have historically been created by regimes in power. The curricula have failed in introducing topics that would encourage mutual understanding. While Albanian pupils along with other non-Macedonian mates are obliged to study about the history, literature and culture of Macedonians, Macedonian pupils do not learn anything, or very little in some cases, about other ethnic groups that live in the same country. Besides, most of the texts, especially those dealing with history and literature, represent obviously ethnocentric agendas and prejudices.

These materials and methods along with this kind of approach which incites ethnocentrism does not contribute anything towards the creation of new visions in the long-term process of collaboration and integration of the education system in Macedonia in western European educational institutions.

2. The multicultural competence (ethnic group, culture, prejudice reduction, and development of ethnic identity)

The presence of the multicultural competence as an important dimension in the process of developing high standards in Macedonia is almost unnoticeable. There have been quite a few initiatives that have emphasized the collaboration among different school communities aiming at decreasing prejudices among them and stimulating the development of the ethnic identity. The lack of subjects that promote interethnic tolerance and multiculturalism is more than evident across the curricula in Macedonia.

It is necessary for the education system in Macedonia to support programs that will help increase the community awareness towards interethnic relations and create competent human resources that will learn, work for and protect issues such as culture, prejudice elimination and development of ethnic identity.

3. Equity Pedagogy (school and classroom climates, students achievement, cultural styles in teaching and learning);

According to Garcia(1991), during the past 40 years it was usual for the American education system to label the minority students or those coming from poor social strata as “culturally deprived”. The theories on cultural deprivation were based on the conjectures that due to the fact that students of minority groups or low stratum do not manifest cultural characteristics of youngsters of the middle class, they are deprived from the prevailing culture. Without it, the theories said, these pupils felt it difficult to compete and achieve good results at school.

Similar problems have been occurring in Macedonia as well. Though most communities hoped that after the fall of Communism, educational possibilities would be equal for everybody, the Equity pedagogy continues to be an open issue in the “democratic” Macedonia. The decentralization process helps in managing efficiently the education institutions whereas as regards the quality and academic performance in education they have to be assured by governing elites at both levels.

4. Societal equity (social action, demographics, culture and race in popular culture)

Human resources represent a very important factor in the development of adequate education infrastructure and conditions. In order to create an effective multicultural environment for pupils, teachers should demonstrate understanding and respect, be good leaders, and create environments for intellectual stimulation. Unfortunately, there are many obstacles in achieving these aims in Macedonian schools. They change adequately with the change in circumstances and the ethnical origin of the service user. I can mention some factors that stimulate teachers intellectually, based on my own experience:

- The need for equilibrium in creating provisions in schools;
- The creation of a more collaborative environment among teachers which would be oriented towards the pupils’ success rather than individual and personal achievements;
- The teacher’s identity in the process.

The aim of bringing up these examples is to emphasize that egalitarianism and tolerance should be the goal not only for students but for teachers and school administrators too, who quite often belong to different ethnic groups. The process of decentralization of education enables this, even though the quality is implemented by internal factors as well as by the egalitarian pedagogy, the multicultural competence and inter-ethnic tolerance.

Based on the above-mentioned arguments, the decentralization of education has brought a series of advantages and positive developments for Albanians. The delegation of competences to the local self-government helps the administrative efficiency of the education system and partial elimination of doubts and frustrations that the Albanian factor had against the political system as a whole.

The linguistic diversity in Macedonia is more than evident and since students are exposed to different languages at an early age, they can acquire those language skills very quickly and easily. A lot of students (especially Albanian and Turkish ones) are at least bi-lingual. Even though the latest recommendations by the OSCE office in Skopje and the Minister of Education are that Albanians should study Macedonian from their first grade, in accordance with the formula for integrated education, it is evident that even without this recommendation, the Albanian pupils have a lot more knowledge in Macedonian than vice versa.

By gaining these competences, local self-government units should aim at resolving these issues:

- Focus on egalitarian education for all ethnicities;

- Expansion of basic knowledge on different local cultures and the development of the “multicultural” viewpoint in learning and teaching;
- Assessment of cultural pluralism and positive attitude towards linguistic diversity;
- Revision of the formula about the calculation of endowments for secondary school pupils within the state budget allocated for education institutions. Until 2008 this formula was publicly shown in the official gazette. Recently, the official gazettes only publish the budget amounts without explaining clearly the formula which produces those amounts. This creates a problem on the Albanian side because it makes them think that the budget is again allocated based on ethnic preferences and not on the equilibrium that was created by the new formula for budget allocation approved in 2007.
- The political influence in education should be minimized or even removed totally both at a local and central level. One of the main arguments about the initiation of the decentralization process was the need of depolitization of the education system. It should enable greater efficiency in the decentralization process itself(Bartlet,2010).
- A general revision of curricula in cooperation with the Ministry of Education in order to adapt the materials and teaching methods to pupils’ needs focused on a balance between academic and market needs as well as to the fight against stereotypes and ethnic prejudices.
- The OSCE, in its Decentralization Analysis Report(OBSE, 2008)), suggests that the local self-government should intensify the relations with school councils and teachers in order for the collaboration to be efficient and constant. Even though 79% of the citizens responded positively to the query if they knew their competences, municipalities should offer training courses for the teaching and the administrative staff so that they can get more acquainted with their responsibilities and obligations.
- The decentralization process helps in managing efficiently the education institutions whereas as regards the quality and academic performance in education they have to be assured by governing elites at both levels.

Such suggestions as well as instructions as a cultural reaction differ in their usage depending on political factors, educational systems, and pupils’ level of knowledge and the diversity of lessons where they take part. There is not “a single and better way” through which new or old pupils become competent(Baker,2001). However, being aware culturally and academically for all cultures and their needs within the educational system would make a great difference in the social development in Macedonia and especially for the Macedonians. The Ohrid Framework Agreement should be seen as a way out for the social prosperity and, of course, according to many theories, the social development often goes through the gates of the educational system.

Bibliography

1. Baker, C. (2001). *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (3rd Ed). Bristol, PA: Multilingual Matters, Ltd.
2. C. Bishof(2009) - Public money for public schools, *Financing Education in South Est Europe - Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative*; Open Society Institute–Budapest, Hungary.
3. Garcia, R.L. (1991)*Teaching in a pluralistic society: Concepts, models, and strategies*. New York: Harper Collins.
4. Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (2008) *A Review of the Social Protection System in the Republic of Macedonia*, Paolo Verme and Elizabeta Kunovska
5. OBSE, Skopje(2008)*Pregled na decentralizacija, oddel za reformi vo javna administracija*.
6. Bartlet, W. (2010)UNDP, *People-Centred Analysis*. March 2008, Skopje: The South East European University (2008) UNDP
7. UNDP, The South East Euroipean University (2009) *People Centred Analyses: regional development, local governance and the quality of life*, Skopje: UNDP and SEEU
8. Poshka, A(2009) *Evaluating the Cultural Element in Teaching Methodology*. Research Office; The South East European University.
9. Uredba za metodologija za utvrduvanje na kriteriumi za raspredelba na blok dotacii za sredno obrazovanie po opstini i gradot Skopje za 2008 godina.Sluzben vesnik na RM broj 130, Datum 26.10.2007
10. World Bank Institute (1999) – *Decentralizing Education in Transition Societies (Case Studies from Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary (Blasz, Halsz, ijmre, Moldovan, Nagy)*
11. ZELS 2009, *Priracnik na nadleznostite na novoizbranite gradonacalnici i clenovite na sovetite na opstinite* (vtoro izdanie)
12. Zakon za osnovno obrazovanie („Sl.vesnik na R. Makedonija” br. 44/95)Vladata na R. Makedonija na sednicata odrzana na 22.6.2005 godina (Odluka br. 19-2326/1).
13. Zakon za srednoto obrazovanie („Sl.vesnik na RM” br.44/95,24/96) i Odluka na Vladata (Odluka br.19-2487/1 od 22 juni 2005 godina).