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Kosovo Education in the 21st Century: A Challenging Future

Abstract

Kosovo's educational system lies at the nexus of complex historical circumstances, the influence of transnational organizations, and local imperatives. With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the political and ethnic tensions played out on an international scale and in the day-to-day lives of Kosovo's citizens. At the end of the second decade since the cessation of hostilities changes have come to the system, but these appear to be fragile and the sustainability of the changes are uncertain. Europe has diminished its role in the change. Some elements of self-determination have emerged with Kosovo in discussions with Serbia on substantial national issues, but progress remains elusive. Balkan states are often regarded as countries in transition. What remains to be resolved is the engagement of decision-makers in development of education. Rather than a political arena, essential for Kosovo is the creation of a professional system to support learning and development through increased financial investments, commitments to quality and resources for education.

Keywords: Kosovo, educational reform, parallel systems, system reconstruction

Introduction

Kosovo's educational system experienced two unique events. The first was the dismissal of Albanian speakers in 1989 from schools and agencies throughout Kosovo and their replacement by Serbian officials (Shahani, 2016). The second, a direct response to the dismissals, was the development of a parallel educational system to continue Albanian-based education in 1992. These two powerful social and political events changed the course of history in Kosovo. This paper begins at the start of the 20th century to establish the context for these events. Divided into three periods, the first period describes the schools prior to breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the second period describes the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1992 through the end of the Kosovo War in 1999. The third period addresses the current and anticipated educational reforms of the 21st century. The focus of the 21st century discussion is on the implementation of the primary and secondary educational system under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The paper only touches on the complex nature of Serbian supported schools located within Kosovo. Other important and related topics including the education of minorities, women, and students with disabilities, which deserve recognition and treatment, are beyond the scope of the paper.

Kosovo education from 1900 to 1992: The context

Kosovo's educational history is intertwined with the historical clashes in the region. To understand current Kosovo education since the fall of the Berlin Wall or

more importantly the death of Tito, we begin at the start of the 20th century. The end of Ottoman empire's four-hundred-year rule of Kosovo in 1912 (Hall, 1994) was followed by turbulent phases. The first Balkan war seeded a divided Kosovo territory to Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece but disputes led to a second Balkan war with the result that Kosovo was partitioned between Serbia and Montenegro. The end of World War I saw the territory incorporated into the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later named Yugoslavia). During World War II Kosovo was occupied by Fascist Italy. Nazi Germany forces supplanted Italy's occupation toward the end of the war and were themselves replaced by the Yugoslavian Partisans under Josip Broz Tito.

Kosovo's education system followed this turbulent path. Schools under the Ottoman Empire were mostly religious schools and opened to Kosovar-Albanians. (Kosovar is used for individuals living in the Kosovo region. For references to specific ethnic groups within the country a hyphenated form of Kosovar-Serbian or Kosovar-Albanian will be used in the paper.) After 1912 and the end of Ottoman rule, Serbian primary and secondary schools were instituted. Occupation by Bulgaria of Pristina in 1916 banned Albanian language schools although areas under Austro-Hungarian rule did permit Albanian language schools to open. During the period of 1919 to 1939 in Yugoslavia, all Albanian-language schools were closed and education was in Serbo-Croatian. Kosovar-Albanian students who attended schools were mostly males with few Islamic women in attendance.

Education took an inclusive turn with Kosovo's occupation by Italy during the Second World War with Albanian language schools again opening in the region. This continued with hundreds of primary schools opened and the first Albanian language high school began in Pristina. At the end of World War II, Kosovo became part of Yugoslavia and Albanian was recognized as a language and an ethnic minority. Primary schools taught Albanian, but high schools were Serbo-Croatian medium schools. 1968 saw increased opportunities available for Albanian language students at all school levels, including the opening of the Albanian language University of Prishtina in 1970.

In 1974 Kosovo was granted greater self-government through revisions in the Yugoslavian constitution including the provision that Albanian could be taught at all levels. As an autonomous region of Serbia, Kosovo now held many of the same rights as the republics of Yugoslavia. The end of the 1970s reforms led to an educational system that offered basic education to all members of society regardless of ethnic origin or religious beliefs. These advances were to be reversed in the 1980-1990s.

After Tito's death in 1980, there was an increase in instability among the six republics of the federation, the economic situation was in decline and in 1981, the University of Prishtina of almost 50,000 students now was 75 per cent ethnic Albanians. It became a focal point for Kosovar Albanian's increasing demands to be a recognized member as a republic rather than an autonomous region of Serbia. In 1981, the Kosovo upheaval, known as the Student Protests of 1981, was initiated at the university and violently repressed by the government.

The Yugoslavian response to unrest was to begin to strip what was considered Albanian influence from the university and the province. To begin, Albanian materials were banned and replaced by materials from Yugoslavia; then professors

and students involved in the unrest were removed from the schools. These efforts began a pattern of repression that escalated over the decade and led to the rise of Slobodan Milošević who gained power by dwelling on ethnic differences and fomenting the Serbian minority in Kosovo. Kosovar-Serbians mounting concern of their loss of status in Kosovo and Milošević's rise to power led to the concentration of power in Belgrade of all elements of government including education. The university was under attack as a hotbed of Albanian nationalism and Serbian response was draconian.

Kosovo's autonomy was terminated by Milošević in 1989. Kosovar-Albanian state employees were removed from their positions and replaced by Serbian personnel. Kosovo education was further transformed with Serbo-Croatian as a required subject and a focus on Serbian history and culture in secondary schools. Serbo-Croatian became the language of instruction at the university as well. Kosovar-Albanians responded with a shadow government and non-violent protests (U.S. State Dept., 2018).

The parallel education system and social fragmentation: 1992-2000

Kosovar-Albanians established a parallel education system as a response to the curriculum changes and dismissal of Albanian language instructors. Created during the early 1990s the success of the alternative schools can be seen in the 300,000 to 450,000 students attending parallel Albanian-language schools set up in Mosques, homes and garages (Shahani, 2016; Gashi, 2017). Discussions between the government and Kosovo activists led by Ibrahim Rugova resulted in agreements intended to bring Albanian students back to the classroom. The Serbian regime allowed some of the elementary schools to work in their buildings to create the impression that the basic rights of Kosovar-Albanians were respected. But even in these schools the students were segregated with walls or shifts (one shift Albanians, one shift Serbs). The Kosovar-Serbian teachers and students protested this arrangement.

Resistance to the government through passive means did not satisfy many Kosovar-Albanians believing that the strategy had not gain the goals of the people. Armed conflict had occurred sporadically from the 1980's but in 1997 the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) formed as an armed resistance increasing attacks on police and military targets in Kosovo. The KLA's stated goal was to create an independent Kosovo state (U.S. State Dept., 2018).

Retaliation by the government under Milosevic against the KLA was unleashed accompanied by wide-spread civilian casualties and human rights violations. A plan was brokered by NATO called the Rambouillet Accords to end the violence, repatriate refugees and internally displaced persons, and create a self-governing entity in Kosovo until a final agreement was reached. Serbia and Russia would not sign off on the agreement which precipitated a bombing campaign in support of the KLA. Massive displacement of Kosovar-Albanian occurred through ethnic cleansing with estimates of well over a million refugees from the war and forced migration (Suhrke et al., 2001). The bombing of Serbian positions lasted 78 days until Serbia agreed to a political process. Kosovo was placed in a protected status administered by the United Nations. Governmental structures were created to govern the area and Kosovar-Albanians were integrated into the new administration.

Along with the displacement of families, over 50% of schools were damaged or destroy in Kosovo (UNHRC, 1999). As ethnic Kosovar-Albanians returned to their homes, reprisal killings and abductions of ethnic Serbs, Roma and Albanians considered informants occurred. Thousands fled from their homes during the latter half of 1999, and many Serbs, Roma and other minorities remain displaced to this day.

Building the system for the 21st century

The war's impact on the education system in Kosovo was devastating. With fifty percent of the schools damaged or destroyed and textbooks, equipment and facilities vandalized, rebuilding was the order of the day. The schools, like most governmental agencies, had little or no leadership. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology was established in 2002 to oversee public education in Kosovo, while municipal departments of education departments as intermediaries between schools and the ministry followed. The reconstruction of school property was daunting, but it was not the critical issue faced by the UN and donor nations. The issue was how to support and assure a transition of Kosovo to a European oriented, democratic and unified country.

Education had been used both as a tool of the state and a weapon of the resistance before the war. Textbooks, language, employment and access were state strategies to privilege Serbian communities. Parallel education systems and political education were strategies of resistance of the Albanian population. The United Nations was faced with systems steeped in politics, outdated methods of instruction and strategies that precluded minority communities, women and the handicapped. Michael Daxner, the education director for UNMIK charged with reconstruction and reforming education invited outside consultants to establish an educational system from the ground up. Imbued with substantial power and significant funding, he made major changes in the system. This first attempt reached some goals proposed by UNMIK and supported locally but left the system in transition rather than modernized. This situation was not limited to Kosovo, but endemic throughout Eastern Europe and former socialist countries (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018). When the director left Kosovo, his parting words were scathing and indicted both local and international communities.

> One observer interviewed characterized [Daxner's speech] it as "a blistering indictment of the deficiencies of Kosovo education" which blasted the system's methodological backwardness, fixation on using education maintain ethnic identity, ingrained sexism, rampant corruption, and the believe that paying lip service to "European standards" would somehow bring them to pass in Kosovo. The observer also noted that Daxner "lashed into" international donors for decreasing funding for Kosovo education at the moment when investments called for reinforcement.

His efforts reconstructed and reformed the system in a few years. The limitations of this strategy were the disenfranchisement of local communities and disassociation of the local experts and families. While many of the educators in Kosovo thought that developing a European-based education system was essential they recognized they were being marginalized in their own country (Sommer & Buckland, 2004). At the close of the first decade of the 21st century, and the first

decade of Kosovo's separation from Serbia, many changes had been undertaken and successes could be measured, but their value and permanency remained uncertain.

In 2008, Kosovo could revel in its proclaimed independence as a country and its progress but begin to reflect on its limited and sometime ephemeral advances. This was particularly true in education. There were criticisms of the capacity of the system to make changes, UNMIK unilateralism and focus on European integration, wide-spread corruption in primary, secondary and post-secondary education, segregated school systems and limited funding for schools as well as extreme variance in performance between rural and urban schools. Kosovo reflected many of the issues facing Eastern European countries moving from semi-planned economies to market economies (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018). What was unique to Kosovo was that it had no history as an independent state. The traditions of other countries in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as independent states were not those of Kosovo which had the experience of autonomy, but not independence.

The second decade of the 21st century saw a restarting and refocusing of efforts in curriculum, teacher training and text materials. This occurred within the supportive if directive non-governmental organizations (NGO) and consultants supplied by western European counties and other donors. Governments and NGOs funded graduate education abroad for potential leaders, foreign curriculum development consultants in subject areas, specialized programs in law, civic and democratic development and advisors in test development and administration. Internally Kosovo saw significant turnover in the leadership of MEST and a series of redirections of effort as priorities changed with successive Ministers.

In a 2004 (Sommers & Buckland) report other concerns were raised by consultants that were prescient. As noted in the report:

> *Core education system responsibilities were outsourced to international actors under the Lead Agency framework. But was the education system develop through this process? On paper, results arising from the Lead Agency framework are in evidence, sometimes impressively so. However, it remains unclear whether UNMIKs early reforms will ultimately manifest themselves as demonstratable and lasting changes at the level of schools and classrooms.* (p. 145)

These changes were occurring when neoliberal models of improvement had been sweeping over Eastern Europe with reforms and educational change marked by outcome measures, western-oriented systems, and comparative analysis. Substantial effort to integrate the Balkan countries into a European model was at the forefront of reform. This gave Kosovo a direction for development but with challenges related to limited resources, cultural context, education vision and unresolved ethnic conflicts that continue to influence the educational enterprise to this day.

After the declaration of Kosovo's independence, the government under a new minister of education decided to change the Pre-University Curriculum Framework after the first Framework of Curriculum was drafted in 2001. The drafting of the new documents began in 2009 and were finalized in 2011. Changes were not based on preliminary research and analysis; the justifications were political so that a new initiative could be proclaimed. While the new curriculum developed student competencies in line with European goals, no discussion with teachers and schools to get suggestions or explain of the rationale were included in the changes. The new curriculum and related methodologies require increased collaborative process and

teaches the students roles of citizens in a democratic system. However, the lack of collaboration, training and communication created many problems and challenges in implementing the curriculum in schools. In this case, educational processes were held captive to political decisions. Changes occurred without prior consultation with experts and teachers who carry the day-to-day challenge of implementation. After implementation beginning in 2016, teachers also voiced their frustration with the lack of textbooks to teach the new curriculum. As a clear example of inadequate planning and top-down decision making, textbooks may not be available until the 2019-2020 academic year.

Likewise, the various projects and programs, not few in number, by the international community, have failed to influence or fundamentally change the state of education. These projects often do not comply with the real requirements of the Kosovo education system. Some of these programs have been designed without effective coordination with the local community and are often replications of programs in other countries that do not reflect the Kosovo context. Both international and local individuals who influence the implementation of these projects have benefited from their execution. This has meant that for many investments success is not the expected outcome.

Another critical remaining challenge is the engagement of the Serbian community. Kosovar-Serbs refused to be part of the education system that was reestablished in 1999 after the end of the conflict. Instead, the Kosovar-Serbs work with the programs (curricula) that are designed in Serbia and use Serbian textbooks. In a way, this is permitted with the Ahtisaari Package, if they are not in conflict with the Constitution of Kosovo. There was attempts for Kosovo Serbs to be included in the Kosovo education system, but they have come to an end without success. Political tensions that happened from time to time made the integration of Kosovar-Serbian schools into the Kosovo education system problematic. Political decisions have created and maintained two systems of education in the country (ECMI, 2018) with one managed by the national government while others managed by Serbian communities and supported by Serbia. While examples of multi-lingual schools including Albanian, Serbian and English instruction for all children exist, these are exceptions, however they do point to a possible model for the future. Currently, there is little discussion or development of strategies to increase these dual or tri-language schools. Other communities, such as Turks, Bosnians, Roma etc., are more effectively integrated into the Kosovo education system and work with programs drafted by the Ministry of Education. Without movement to address the concerns of the Kosovar-Serbian community, integration of populations remains on the distant horizon.

Conclusion: Looking to the future – opportunities and impediments

Kosovo's educational system lies at the nexus of complex historical circumstances, the influence of transnational organizations, and local imperatives. With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the political and ethnic tensions played out on an international scale and in the day-to-day lives of Kosovo's citizens. At the end of the second decade since the end of hostilities changes have come to the system, but these appear to be fragile and the sustainability of the changes are uncertain. Europe has diminished its role in the process. Some elements of self-determination have

emerged with Kosovo in discussions with Serbia on substantial national issues, but progress remains elusive. Balkan states are often regarded as countries in transition. The question has been: How long will it take for a democracy to emerge? This may be the wrong question and the wrong expectation. Perhaps the goal should be self-determination and the outcome reflect the complex and diverse country. New leadership may have to emerge, and new partnerships forged before much of this comes to fruition. Education lies at the heart of this process. It is and will be both a mirror of the society and guide to its future. What remains to be resolved is the engagement of decision-makers in development of education. Rather than a political arena, essential is the creation of a professional system to support learning and development through increased financial investments, commitments to quality and resources for education as anticipated in "Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021".

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