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Peacebuilding and Education: Post-conflict education reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina

This article addresses the issue of education reform in post-conflict environments and explores the link between education and peacebuilding. It is based on six months of field research in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), conducted from June to October 2017.

The article aims at comparing two approaches to education reform in BiH – the so-called ‘two schools under one roof’ system that was established in the entity of Federation of BiH (FBiH) and Brčko District model of the integrated multi-ethnic education system. Brčko became the first city to remove physical barriers between students of different ethnicities and place them in mixed multi-ethnic classes. The research suggests a strong link between the integrated education model and higher levels of reconciliation. At the same time, it demonstrates that it is not possible to separate the education reform from political processes and dissociate the classroom environment from the broader social context.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Education, Peacebuilding, Brčko District, ‘Two Schools Under One Roof’, Reconciliation.

Barış İnşası ve Eğitim: Çatışma Sonrası Bosna Hersek’te Eğitim Reformu

Bu makale, çatışma sonrası ortamlarda eğitim reformu konusunu ele almakta ve eğitim ile barış inşası arasındaki bağlantıyı araştırmaktadır. Eğitim genellikle çatışmanın hemen ardından bir öncelik olmasa da, uzlaşmayı baltalama veya kolaylaştırma potansiyeli onu sürdürülebilir bir barış sürecinin çok önemli bir boyutu haline getirir. Bosna-Hersek’teki (BH) eğitim reformu önemli bir gecikmeyle başladı ve etnik bölünmeler ve on üç ayrı bakanlığı kuran Dayton sonrası siyasi sistemin karmaşıklığı tarafından yüklendi. Bu makale, Bosna Hersek Federasyonu (BHF) bünyesinde kurulan ‘tek çatı altında iki okul’ sistemi olarak adlandırılan BH’deki eğitim reformuna yönelik iki yaklaşımı ve entegre çok etnikli Brčko Bölgesi modelini karşılaştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Brčko, farklı etnik kökenlerden öğrenciler arasındaki fiziksel engelleri kaldıran ve onları çok etnik gruptan oluşan sınıflara yerleştiren ilk şehir oldu. Araştırma, entegre eğitim modeli ile daha yüksek düzeyde uzlaşma arasında güçlü bir bağlantı olduğunu öne sürüyor. Aynı zamanda, eğitim reformunu siyasi süreçlerden ayırmanın ve sınıf ortamını daha geniş sosyal bağlamdan ayırmanın mümkün olmadığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bosna Hersek, Eğitim, Barış İnşası, Brcko Bölgesi, ‘Tek Çatı Altında İki Okul’.

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1. Introduction

Conflicts have a devastating impact on education, and their effects go beyond the destruction of infrastructure, schools, and libraries. The psychological impact on students and teachers, and the collective trauma lead to degradation of the education system (Buckland, 2004:1) and pose a serious peacebuilding challenge. The past decade was marked by the growing interest in identifying links between education and conflict and adopting education models that can build resilience to conflict.

This article aims at comparing two approaches to education reform in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) – the so-called "two schools under one roof" system that was established in the entity of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and Brčko District model of the integrated multi-ethnic education system. Brčko became the first city to remove physical barriers between students of different ethnicities and place them in mixed multi-ethnic classes. The education reform in Brčko was just one dimension of the multiethnic reform package that was going to initiate the post-conflict transformation, encourage the return of refugees and IDPs, and facilitate the emergence of multi-ethnic environment that was wiped out by conflict. This article will provide a brief overview of the reform process, and address the potential link between the education reform and higher levels of reconciliation.

The article is based on six months of field research in BiH conducted from May to October 2017. The study of links between education and peacebuilding was part of a wider research that aimed at evaluating the success of Brčko District as a potential model for inter-ethnic reconciliation. The field research consisted of close observations of inter-ethnic relations in the District, and pre-arranged semi-structured interviews with the citizens of Brčko District. Interviews were mostly conducted outside in an informal setting (e.g. the garden of the Grand Hotel was a suitable choice because of its central location and because it seemed more neutral than the ethnically divided cafes). I have formally interviewed 43 respondents (24 Bosniaks, 15 Serbs, and 4 Croats) and all interviews were conducted in local languages. Respondents were asked to describe their experience of education in Brčko District with five education-related subquestions:

- Is education in Brčko District different to education in other parts of BiH?
- How do you feel about integrated multi-ethnic schools?
- Do you feel that the topic of war should be avoided in school environment?
- Do you spend time with people from other communities outside the work/school environment?
- Do you think that people in Brčko achieved higher levels of reconciliation than in other parts of BiH?

To minimize the potential interviewer's effect on the level of openness, respondents were encouraged to speak spontaneously with minimum intervention or interruption. The choice of this case study is significant because it provides a valuable insight into two different approaches to education reform, implemented in similar post-conflict conditions (in FBiH and Brčko District).

The close link between education and identity makes education reform one of the most challenging parts of the peacebuilding process. A growing number of studies are highlighting the strong connection between education and the likelihood of achieving sustainable peace in post-conflict societies (Bush-Saltarelli, 2000; Smith-Vaux, 2003; Emkic, 2018). The main goal is to

ensure that 'education does not contribute to the likelihood of relapse into violence and actively builds social cohesion to help prevent violence (Buckland, 2005: 32). Some authors have raised the question of education reform having the potential to worsen the conflict and called for careful consideration when contributing resources to education:

'By asking critical questions about the relationship between education and conflict we can see that education may be deeply embroiled in the conflict. This raises a serious question about whether contributing resources to education could make the conflict worse' (Smith-Vaux, 2002: 19).

In post-conflict societies, education has the potential to play a dual role – it can facilitate development and reconciliation or it can be used as a tool to promote division and prolong the conflict. This dual nature of education has been referred to as "the two faces of education" (Bush-Saltarelli, 2000: vii). The potential negative impacts are best understood in terms of conflict-maintaining features of the educational system that range from promoting negative stereotypes and manipulating history to actual segregation of schools. Education can therefore serve as an impetus for escalating conflict, denying cultural plurality, and encouraging inter-group hostility. On the other hand, "peace education" can help sustain inter-ethnic tolerance, non-violence, and mutual respect. (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009).

The first part of the article will provide a brief overview of the two key elements that influenced the education reform in BiH in the post-conflict period: the legacy of the Yugoslav education system and the legacy of inter-ethnic conflict. It will then address the phenomenon of 'two schools under one roof' system that is still widely spread in FBiH despite two decades of peacebuilding. Finally, the article will examine the education reform in Brčko District with particular focus on local perceptions and the day-to-day experience of going to school. This is done in line with the concept of local-ownership of peace process as the key condition to achieving reconciliation and sustainable peace.

2. Post-conflict education reform in BiH

During the war in BiH the education system was seriously disrupted with the vast majority of all schools and universities destroyed or damaged, and libraries burnt to the ground. Moreover, the mass displacement of people and the lack of basic goods and services made it difficult for schools to operate and provide regular education. As Perry (2003: 23) notes, schools in wartime BiH continued operating 'out of sheer determination and improvisation'. One respondent I interviewed described the school conditions during the war:

'During the war, I attended school in the village of Maoca, near Brčko. The classes were held in underground shelters and basements and there were around fifty students in each class. During the winter, we were all required to bring pieces of wood with us so our teacher could light a fire in the fireplace and keep the basement warm. We were mostly just learning to read and write and some basic math, I don't remember having any other lessons until after the war.' (Bosniak, NGO representative, 32, interviewed on July 17, 2017).

In the aftermath of conflict, the international community had a long list of priorities in BiH and the educational reform was not placed at the top of their agenda. In a country, shattered by war, the focus had to be placed on military stabilization, refugee returns, and rebuilding basic infrastructure. None of the international organizations involved in peacebuilding in BiH was given a clear mandate to ensure educational reform. This is why the years following the signing of the Dayton Peace agreement (DPA) were marked by the implementation of many small projects by various organizations that lacked both coordination and a firm mandate.

Although Annex 6 of the DPA briefly mentions 'the right to education', it does not provide any specific instructions on how to implement the educational reform nor does it set any clear timeframe. This explains why it was only in mid-2002 that the OSCE recognized the need to implement more organized and coordinated programs that would target a comprehensive educational reform. Around the same time the Office of the High Representative also organized a conference on educational reform in BiH where the Deputy High Representative, Donald Hays, acknowledged that education reforms were not given the attention they deserved and that both, international and local actors, were late to recognize their importance:

'We are late in tackling this issue, one that should have been viewed as a core issue for BiH post-war recovery and an issue that will definitely influence the success or failure of all our efforts to create a free, democratic and stable BiH.' (Hays, 2002, cited in Perry, 2003:3)

There was an evident struggle between the local actors that understood education as a crucial aspect of the identity-building process and the international actors that saw it as means of overcoming ethnonational divisions and achieving reconciliation. A Peace Implementation Council (PIC) meeting in Bonn in December 1997 emphasized the need to provide education that would 'contribute to tolerance and stability within a multi-ethnic BiH' (cited in Perry, 2003: 47). The reintegration of segregated schools and reconciliation among divided ethnonational groups were among the main goals of post-conflict intervention in BiH (Hromadzic, 2008: 544).

All this was happening in the midst of complex political and constitutional landscape created by the Dayton peace agreement, in which the education system was to be regulated by entity and canton governments. The peace agreement divided the country into two semi-independent entities, and one condominium under international supervision (the Federation of BiH (FBiH), Republika Srpska (RS) and Brčko District (BD)). The entity of FBiH was further divided into ten cantons, and according to the Constitution of FBiH (1995), "*cantons were solely responsible for developing educational policies, including declarations for education, ensuring education, as well as developing and implementing cultural policies.*"

In practice this meant that there were thirteen different authorities in charge of regulating the education reform (the government of the RS, the government of FBiH, ten canton governments in FBiH, and Brčko District). Each entity had an entirely different education policy and in the case of the FBiH each canton implemented its own policy. Moreover, the cantons were allowed to have "special relationships" with other countries, so Croat majority cantons could establish ties with schools in Croatia and the same applied to schools in RS and Serbia (mostly used to import textbooks and teaching materials from these countries) (Šarančić, 2016: 27). So far, practice has shown that individual administrative units have different, sometimes diametrically opposed, concepts of education and that each conducts its own policy (Pašalić-Kreso, 2008). This extreme decentralization together with the fear-dominated political environment made it easy for politicians to manipulate and politicize any step towards establishing an equal, open and fair educational system. The institutional setting allowed the political elites to develop deliberate strategies based on the politics of identity and fear to continue the war by other means in spite of the peace agreement (Perry, 2003: 27).

Apart from the complexity of the transition process, the education reform was also influenced by the communist experience and the education system of the former Yugoslavia. Comparing to other communist countries, the standards and the quality of education in Yugoslavia were relatively high with good access to primary and secondary education. Yugoslavia's leader, Josip Broz Tito, recognized the role of education as a tool to unite people and achieve economic progress but also to promote a certain ideology and worldview. Education was designed to raise socialist awareness and dedication to the political regime as well as to encourage the adoption of shared Yugoslav identity. In an attempt to overcome the nationalist divisions and heavy legacies of WW2 Tito advanced the idea of 'brotherhood and unity' (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*), and promoted the priority of Yugoslav identity over all other ethnic, national or religious affiliations. The early years of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) were marked by growing

industrialization and urbanization as well as heavy investment in education. The education system was subject to ideological control of the Communist party (Spasenovic-Zivkovic, 2010: 217). The years following Tito's death were marked by moving away from 'socialist' to 'ethnonational' schooling (Stabback, 2007: 49) but the education remained the instrument of political control. As part of the wider struggle for political power and territory, the curricula were increasingly politicized and formed cleavages along the ethnonational lines.

3. Educational apartheid in BiH: Two schools under one roof

Two decades after the peace treaty was signed, the conflict continues to overshadow the schools and the education system in BiH. This is especially apparent in the case of the so called 'two schools under one roof' ('dviije škole pod jednim krovom') that were established in the aftermath of conflict. As the name suggests, the system aimed at establishing two different schools with students of different ethnic background attending classes in the same building but at different times and with long breaks in between to minimize contact. The intention was to encourage refugees to return to their homes and grant them a sense of security as well as to bring Serb, Croat and Bosniak schoolchildren closer together by sharing the same spaces. Nonetheless, students followed different curriculums, used different textbooks and some schools even built walls and schoolyard fences to physically separate children of different ethnicities who attended classes in the same shift. Contrary to the goal of bringing children together and improving inter-ethnic relations, the system enabled ethnic segregation and build physical barriers that prevented students from interacting and communicating between each other. This is why the system is sometimes referred to as the 'educational apartheid'.

The 'two schools under one roof' approach initially enjoyed the support of the UN, the OSCE and the US government as it was widely believed that such system was merely a temporary and transitional step towards the final integration of schools and unification of the educational system in BiH. The international community, however, quickly realized that the system had only exacerbated inter-ethnic divisions and threatened to become a permanent feature of the post-conflict institutional design. While the conflict and ethnic cleansing dramatically changed the ethnic makeup of the country, separated communities and 'unmixed' previously multiethnic cities, it was the postwar period and segregated education that institutionalized the division and gave it a degree of legitimacy and justification. Instead of promoting integration and reconciliation, the system had merely reinforced boundaries and inter-ethnic polarization:

Instead of growing up in a culturally diverse and rich society, students are separated from one other, often learning to hate those who are 'different'. Separate curricula, separate languages, separate history text-books, separate alphabets, separate religious studies... (Pašalić-Kreso, 2008: 359)

What was originally conceived as a temporary solution had now become a norm in fifty-seven schools in the Federation (mostly in Central Bosnian, Herzegovina-Neretva, and Zenica-Doboj Cantons). Considering that Republika Srpska was largely mono-ethnic with a small percentage of returnees, the model of 'two schools under one roof' was never widely spread. The needs of minority students in Republika Srpska were generally not accommodated.

In response to what was largely perceived by international actors as the failure of the two schools under one roof model, there were repeated calls to end segregation and reform the school system. All such attempts were blocked by political parties and slowed down by the overlapping and ill-defined competencies of state, entity and cantonal ministries of education. International efforts to 'develop a multi-ethnic learning environment in schools, aimed at reconciliation among ethnic groups', 'remove ethnic segregation from schools' and 'ensure that one curriculum is taught to all children' (UN, 2016: 21-23), were met with local resistance and achieved little progress in reintegrating the schools.

By 2002, the international community was becoming increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of reforms and experiencing a donor 'fatigue' followed by the need to relocate attention and resources to new conflict areas. Determining priorities in such conditions was an enormous challenge and the education reform proved to be a particularly sensitive issue, fiercely resisted and contested by local actors who disagreed with the notion of integrated multiethnic schools.

While education reforms included a wide range of policies, from pre-school to university education, efforts to reform the compulsory primary and general secondary educational programs were their most crucial and the most politicized part. This is not to say that other efforts were not politicized or deny the fact that higher education and academia became ground for political manipulation. Nonetheless, the primary and secondary education play a central role in transmitting norms and values and shaping the identity of younger students. The foundations of identity and national dogma are established at this stage and the process of socialization and integration has much lesser impact after this period. Empirical research findings are consistent with this claim and reveal that

'Ethnic attitudes are formed early, and once positive or negative prejudices are formed, they tend to increase with time. Early socialization experiences are, therefore, critical in the formation of ethnic attitudes'. (Bush-Saltarelli, 2000: 3)

Language, history and worldviews are promoted through informal education at home but also through formal education in schools. This is why, next to the family, school is the most significant '*agency for cultural reproduction, socialization and identity formation*' (Williams, 1992).

The educational strategies in divided or post-conflict societies have to address two key aspects of integration: linguistic and cultural rights (Perry, 2003: 10). The linguistic rights are concerned with ensuring that the language of instruction and the languages taught at school reflect the ethnic diversity and provide equal opportunities for all students to actively participate in class. The education reform in BiH had to include linguistic rights as the language formerly spoken in Yugoslavia (Serbo-Croatian) was now recognized as three distinctive languages (Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian) and the right to speak 'one's own' language became closely linked to identity. The equality of all three languages and two scripts (Latin and Cyrillic) was declared in both entities in 2001 (Ibid: 13). The 2014 UN report on the state of education in BiH highlights the politicization of educational policies, especially in terms of using cultural and linguistic rights as means of increasing inter-ethnic divisions:

'Cultural rights, including linguistic rights, have been seriously misinterpreted by a number of actors to justify policies of separation and the establishment of hermetically sealed communities. The right to be taught in one's mother tongue cannot justify segregation; no one should invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law, nor to limit their scope. In particular, the three official languages and the two scripts officially recognized in Bosnia and Herzegovina must not be considered a reason for separation but rather an asset that facilitates communication and openness to others.' (Shaheed, 2014: 100)

Cultural rights are concerned with a group of courses that include history, art, literature, music and other courses that may reflect group's shared history and experience. These courses are potentially controversial and open to various interpretations, due to their subjective nature. Deciding on the curriculum and content of these courses often becomes the most challenging part of the educational reforms in post-conflict societies considering that '*the content taught to children, the facts they learn about their culture, the history of their country and the history of other (often neighboring) countries, will play a key part in shaping their worldview and perceptions*' (Perry, 2003: 14). History lessons are particularly important in the transition period as they tend to be politicized and designed to promote certain events, personalities and versions of history and instilling pride in one's culture and heritage. The emphasis on history education is therefore often understood as means of cultural identity preservation.

While the so called 'national subjects' can be means of teaching a particular culture and deepening the understanding of community's history and heritage, they can also promote stereotypes and division and increase the polarization in post-war environment. The challenge of teaching these courses lies in overcoming the politicized lens of violent conflict and emphasizing shared and transversal subjects.

4. Education Reform in Brčko District

'Brčko has been a beacon illuminating the possibility of successful education reform in BiH'
ICG 2003

The Dayton agreement failed to resolve the status of the geopolitically important town of Brčko, and it was only in 1999, under immense international pressure, that the town was declared a special District under international supervision. While the District was granted almost complete independence from the Entities, it soon began to resemble a protectorate under the auspices of the international Supervisor whose authority was virtually unlimited and extended to all areas of social, political, and economic life in the District. In practice, this meant that the Supervisor could impose any reform or legislation even without the consent of local actors. Education reform in the Brčko District and the Supervisor's single-handed imposition of an integrated multi-ethnic education system was in sharp contrast with the system established in the rest of the country.

When the war in BiH ended, Serb, Croat and Bosniak children in Brčko attended separate schools with their own ethnic curricula (regulated by the RS law, the Tuzla canton law and the Posavina canton law). The establishment of the District changed the political conditions and paved the way for reforms that would become the core of international peacebuilding engagements in Brčko. The goal of integrating the education system was clearly stated in the 1999 Final Award:

...the Supervisor (of Brčko District) will integrate the District's educational system, harmonize curricula within the District, and ensure removal of teaching material, which the Supervisor considers to be inconsistent with the objective of creating a democratic, multi-ethnic society within the District (Annex to Brčko District Final Award, 18 August 1999, point 11).

In September 2000, first steps towards multi-ethnic education were made with the establishment of 'two schools under one roof' system as the maximum integration international community dared to push in Brčko. The system of 'two schools under one roof' established school attendance by all ethnic groups but at different times or at different parts of the building, effectively allowing the students to avoid any direct contact with each other. The actual implementation of this system meant moving Bosniak and Croat students who attended schools in the rural parts of the District into Brčko town and placing them in the same school building with Serb students. The transport of students from surrounding villages to school and back was done collectively by buses. The students were expected to enter the school building immediately after leaving the bus and board the buses as soon as their classes finished.

The reform was soon met with violent resistance and four-day protests that culminated in Serb demonstrators attacking the properties and residences of both returnees and foreigners, shouting "Out Turks! Out Americans!" (ICG, 2003: 15). There was a widespread sense of suspicion surrounding the international actors' presence in Brčko, and they were perceived not as part of the solution but as part of the problem. The students shouting 'Out Americans' illustrates that international actors were seen as intruders and that their engagement was perceived as a form of occupation. The violent protests sent a signal to the Supervisor that any further attempt of education reform would have to be carefully calculated and flexible enough to accommodate various alternatives. Following the protests, the schools were closed down for a month, and this was an opportunity to develop a new strategy and initiate the second phase of integration.

The first education law proposed by the Supervisor following the protests was rejected by the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) and the Serb Orthodox Church (ICG, 2003). They opposed the equality of languages and the removal of national and religious iconography from schools and refused to give their support to the law proposal in the Assembly. This prompted a reaction from the Supervisor who decided to use his authority and impose the *'Single law on Education and Harmonized Curriculum'* despite the lack of support in the Assembly.

In 2001, the Supervisor appointed separate boards for primary and secondary education and their main task was to harmonize the three existing national curricula and plan the integration of students and teachers. The most challenging part of the reform was coming up with the curricula for the category of 'national subjects' that included history, language and literature. As mentioned earlier, these courses became controversial in the post-war period as they were an important part of multiple projects of ethno-national citizenship (Perry, 2003:33) Nationalist leaders stressed the importance of promoting national values and attitudes across generations as the key aspect of preserving their identity.

After careful considerations, it was agreed that these courses would be taught separately and that teachers and students would be entitled to use their native tongues and choose between the use of Latin or Cyrillic script (in primary schools, teachers would be obliged to use both scripts, generally switching between scripts every week). History class curriculum was designed to cover only the history of the region until the Second World War and therefore avoid the most sensitive topics.

From July to September 2001, the teaching staff was selected and trained in the new curriculum that included specific provisions for increased contact time between students from different ethnic groups and introduced a new course on Democracy and Human Rights (OSCE 2007:7). It was clear that adapting the curricula and removing the sensitive topics would not be enough to push the reform through. Training teachers that would genuinely adopt the reform and encourage critical thinking and discussion was the key to success. Some respondents, however, recalled that teachers were more motivated by high salaries than their personal belief that integrated schools were desirable. Teachers were, in the end, just ordinary citizens that carried their own burden of war experience and trauma:

'Some of my colleagues refused to teach in mixed classrooms. They said they would rather move to a different place or lose their job than teach something that goes against their beliefs and consciousness' (Serb, teacher, 48, interviewed on August 2, 2017).

'I did not face any problems in the classroom, it was more awkward in the shared teachers' room. The room was somehow informally divided into separate 'ethno corners' and we avoided talking to each other unless it was absolutely necessary. For some reason, we were expected to teach the kids something we could not practice ourselves' (Bosniak, teacher, 48, August 2, 2017).

The main difference between Brčko and the rest of BiH at this point was that the international Supervisor for Brčko was given a clear mandate to reform the education allowing him to achieve significant progress despite the delay caused by Brčko's unresolved status. There was no clear mandate on the state level and the education reform remained trapped between conflicting entity interests. At the same time, this caused the citizens of Brčko to view the reforms as an experimental program and themselves as guinea pigs. The former Supervisor Henry L. Clarke, in his address to teachers in late August 2001, reflected on such concerns and expressed the importance of education reform for the success of the whole peacebuilding project in Brčko:

'Some people talk about Brčko as a laboratory. I do NOT consider Brčko a laboratory. We are NOT testing anything, or anybody's theory. We are making the minimum changes that are essential to reconstruct Brčko after a destructive war, and to give our children the chance for a better life.' (OHR Press Release, 'Remarks to Secondary School Teachers by Henry L. Clarke, Supervisor of Brčko', 22 August 2001.)

Following the failure of the single-handedly imposed 'two schools under one roof' model, the new reforms were introduced gradually. In the first academic year only the youngest of children (first grades) in each school were integrated while other classes remained segregated. This approach was meant to ease the transition without disrupting the existing classes. Students and their parents were given time to get used to the idea of mixed classrooms and teachers had the chance to prepare themselves for teaching in multi-ethnic environment. Overall the reintegration of schools in Brčko District went remarkably smoothly and was seen as a potential model for reforms on entity and state level:

'In order to maintain the status quo, some in society even suggest that the integration of schools is another form of assimilation. The District of Brčko belies this argument. There, students of different ethnicities go to school together, receive instruction in their own languages in the same classroom, and retain their individual cultural identities... The evidence suggests that, with sufficient political will, it can serve as a model for the rest of BiH' (OSCE, 2007:5).

The education reforms in Brčko were based on the premises of contact hypothesis that suggested that maximizing the time students spend in a classroom together would teach them tolerance through the simple process of going to school (Paulson, 2011, Perry, 2003:37). The integration of schools was perceived as the underlying condition for achieving reconciliation and transforming the inter-ethnic relations. A number of scholars, however, reject the assumption of linear and causal link between education and reconciliation. The criticism is rooted in the fact that such approaches tend to apply standardized solutions (education-for-reconciliation) to various environments and therefore ignore the local interpretations and meanings constructed by children themselves (Paulson, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that education reform does not happen in a social vacuum and that there are many elements that interact and influence the outcomes of implemented policies. The process can, for example, be influenced by strategies teachers employ to avoid sensitive topics (Bekerman, 2009; Jones, 2011: 82) like in the case of history lessons and the decision to avoid the topics that dealt with post-WW2 history.

The vast majority of respondents regarded the shared classrooms as neutral spaces that encouraged tolerance and inter-ethnic cooperation. These excerpts from interviews with high school teachers illustrate the transformation of inter-ethnic attitudes:

'All students should feel safe and comfortable, free to express their opinions and ask questions. Our goal is to create a relaxed atmosphere that will allow the students to connect on the basic human level and form friendships.' (Bosniak, biology teacher, 47, interviewed on July 21, 2017).

'Reintegration of schools is perhaps the most successful reform in Brčko. The change in students' attitudes and behavior is so profound and visible. Honestly, I did not believe it would work as quickly as it did' (Croat, teacher, 40, interviewed on July 21, 2017).

While the education reform was portrayed as one of the most prominent dimensions of successful peacebuilding in Brčko District, it remained unclear whether the reforms that had been initiated and imposed by the Supervisor would be sustainable in the long run and outlast his mandate. Some respondents expressed doubts about the long-lasting effects of mixed education system in regards to reconciliation and shift in inter-ethnic attitudes:

'Yes, high schools are integrated and that is a success to itself. But does this really tell us anything about reconciliation and transforming attitudes? Most high school students still do not spend time together after school and when it comes to university choices they clearly prefer cities where their community is dominant. All Serb students continue their education in Banja Luka, Novi Sad or Belgrade. Bosniaks go to Tuzla or Sarajevo, Croats to Zagreb and this is where the 'mixing' ends.' (Bosniak, university student, 20, interviewed on July 18, 2017).

Other respondents also expressed the fear of reconciliation and what it may entail in the case of another war:

'If kids go to school together, spend time together, go out together they will become friends, fall in love, marry each other. This is what I would like to avoid. The families that were mixed were the ones hurt the most during the war' (Bosniak, 38, lawyer, interviewed on July 18, 2017).

Ironically, the removal of barriers between children and forming close friendships is perceived as a potential risk. Such attitudes depict the lingering fear and anticipation of another conflict despite peacebuilding efforts. At the same time, it indicates that the ethnonational narrative is not necessarily the dominant factor influencing the inter-ethnic relations as the fear of violence prevails.

An overlooked dimension of parent's reluctant attitude towards enrolling their children in multi-ethnic schools is the complexity of every-day class interactions that often lack sensible solutions. Parents repeatedly pointed out the absurdity of school system in which integrated, multi-ethnic schools were still dominated by inter-ethnic divisions. The following statement illustrates the type of challenges they face:

'My son started school this year and we decided to send him to school which is the closest to our house. It happens to be Druga Osnovna (Second Elementary School) which is one of the few multi-ethnic primary schools in the District. In his class, there is approximately the same number of Bosniak and Serb students and since children were supposed to start learning to write, the question was whether they would first be taught the Cyrillic or Latin alphabet. To avoid any complaints, it was decided that the teacher would divide the board into two parts and teach both scripts simultaneously. It was left up to the children to choose which side of the board to follow. So, six year olds are basically forced to decide for themselves if they will be writing Cyrillic or Latin and place themselves in a certain category. I find the whole system utterly ridiculous and quite harmful. When I was a student in Yugoslavia we were also learning both scripts, in first grade Latin and in second grade Cyrillic and no one made it a big deal. My wife and I are now wondering if we had made a mistake by sending him to multi-ethnic school.' (Bosniak, NGO representative, 40, interviewed on July 27, 2017).

The degree of success and the sustainability of the education reform have been put to test over the past eight years, following the suspension of the Supervisor's authority in Brčko in 2012. The one topic that continued to emerge throughout interviews and conversations with Brčko citizens was the lack of investment in education and too much focus on ethnicity and integration. The commonly shared view was that international actors placed integration at the top of their agenda at the expense of implementing reforms that would increase the quality of education and create a competitive and stimulating school environment. The blame was not placed exclusively on international actors but also on local political leaders who focused their attention primarily on protecting the 'national interest':

'So, imagine that, instead of ethnic bickering, we focused on applying the best models in Brčko, models that worked in other places. Why couldn't we sit and decide to apply for example principles of the Finnish school model or introduce some Montessori elements or whatever. But no, all the attention was focused on protecting ,national interests'. I'm afraid the train has left the station and we are stuck with the same old Yugoslav education system only thing we added to the system are divisions and more nationalist brain-washing.' (Bosniak, former Brčko assembly member, 48, interviewed on May 27, 2017).

'What is this obsession with how many Serbs, how many Bosniaks? They should rather ask how many computers and how many microscopes we have in our schools. The focus needs to be shifted from ethnicity to providing quality education' (Bosniak, 42, NGO representative, interviewed on June 12, 2017).

These attitudes illustrate an important shift in citizens' priorities and the overall fatigue caused by persisting ethno-national narratives that neglect more essential issues like the quality of education and the degree of unfulfilled potential in Brčko's schools.

5. Conclusion

Post-conflict environment is burdened by poverty, unemployment and high tensions. While education reforms can facilitate the peace process and encourage reconciliation in such setting, they can also fuel violence and hostility (Smith and Vaux, 2003; Perry, 2003). Establishing ethnic segregation of schools or the use of education as a tool to reinforce political and ethnic divisions deepens the divisions, and negatively affects the post-conflict recovery.

The existence of 'two schools under one roof' in Bosnia and Herzegovina despite two decades of international peacebuilding indicates the underlying societal security dilemma. Contrary to their intention, the adopted policies increase inter-ethnic polarization and the need to strengthen and protect ethnic identity. This is closely linked to the widespread anticipation of another conflict, and the lingering fear that still shapes the community relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Brčko District was the first place in Bosnia and Herzegovina where international actors successfully initiated and implemented education reform and established integrated multiethnic schools. The success of educational reform and integration process in Brčko District was measured by the level of integrating ethno-national communities in numbers representative of their populations. Needless to say, such narrow criteria fail to capture other aspects of the process and overlook the insecurities and contestation that shape the dynamics of inter-ethnic relations. The links between integrated education and reconciliation proved to be more complex and do not necessarily translate into change in attitudes. At the same time, Brčko experience demonstrates that reconciliation should not be understood as the end point achieved with successful reforms but rather as an ongoing process of contestation and redefinition of mutual relations. Placing emphasis on universal topics that transcend political and ethnic divisions has the potential to reduce intergroup conflict and increase mutual understanding.

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