



# Education as a bridge, not a boundary: the voice of children

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## National group of subjects perpetuates discriminatory practices in education: assimilation vs. segregation

As known, legal framework and constitutional set-up left the educational issues under the jurisdiction of entities/cantons. Consequently, Department of Education within the Ministry of Civil Affairs at state level does not have the effective power or mechanisms to implement its own decisions. Further problems generated by the legal framework are ethnically coloured curricula and national group of subjects (hereinafter: NGS), characterized by the ethnocentric and sometimes latently offensive textbooks. These curricula generate two different discriminatory problems: the dominant model of assimilation (children who belong to minority have no choice but to learn from the curricula used by ethnic majority in school, so the ethnic particularity of a minority disappears) and the model of separation/segregation of children in one school along the ethnic lines (“two schools under one roof”). In the attempts to solve the problem, it is challenging to reconcile the principle of non-discrimination with the right to be educated on mother language.<sup>2</sup> So, there is certain dilemma how to end the assimilation without introducing any segregation policies – and does the NGS and even the existence of “two schools under one roof” seem as “necessary evil” in the conditions of prevalence of curriculum of one ethnic group in certain school. The very existence of NGS provokes assimilation and segregation and confronts these two constantly, distracting attention from the core and the cause of the problem (textbook content) to the confrontation between segregation and assimilation, so the current situation seems unsolvable, but the NGS itself is the problem. In this way, NGS perpetuates discrimination in the educational system of B&H.

## National group of subjects vs. the Rule of Law

The content of NGS incites segregation of students and society as a whole, and does not contribute to one of the objectives of the education, as stated in the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education of B&H (hereinafter: FLPSE): *developing awareness of commitment to the State of B&H* (Trbić, 2007). The alarming moment for the culture of living of the B&H society is that these discriminatory practices gradually have become taken for granted, normalised and routinized (Jansen, 2012).

Although initiated by the international community, NGS breaches all the international conventions B&H is obliged to abide by. For example, UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) prescribes that the curriculum should be culturally relevant and adapted to the individual needs, oriented towards promotion of human rights and tolerance, child’s competences and skills. As set out in International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the content of education should be culturally relevant and appropriate to every child. The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) sets out that *no one shall be discriminated against by any public authority on any ground* (Protocol No.12 to the ECHR, 2000). According to the Article 2 of the Constitution of B&H, ECHR has the primacy over all domestic laws. Moreover, as set out in its Article 3, Constitution of B&H prescribes the duty of all cantons/entities to abide by ECHR and to help the state to fulfill its international obligations.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Article 3 of the FLPSE prescribes the development of the awareness of the child’s own cultural identity as one of the goals of education. In that way, one could interpret the cultural identity as primarily ethnic identity in first place. However, ECHR has primacy over domestic laws, and it sets out that there is no excuse for discrimination on any ground.

## Summary

Fragmented and ethnocentric educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina fails to meet international obligations, does not abide by domestic laws, and continues with discriminatory policies in education. National group of subjects<sup>1</sup> generates segregation and assimilation in primary and secondary schools in B&H, creating the disintegrative and ethnocentric culture of remembrance. This brief offers some solutions to render the education less ethnocentric and more oriented towards universal human values. Informal, testimony-based education in schools, related to the positive examples of inter-ethnic friendships and solidarity during war period, appeared as the option the students are interested in. Moreover, this brief tries to bring out the discussion about the possible steps towards long-term changes in educational system, which would possibly end the discriminatory practices and help government of B&H to meet its international obligations, especially when it comes to the fulfilment of conditions for European integration.

<sup>1</sup> The Interim Agreement on Accommodation of Specific Needs and Rights of Returnee Children (2002), suggested by the representatives of international community in B&H, introduced the *national group of subjects*: language, literature, history, geography and religious instruction, each adjusted to the specific ethnic group.

<sup>2</sup> The report of the Working group for analysis of the phenomenon „two schools under one roof”, april 2009. See in: Brkić, M., and Brkić, M.A. *Two schools under one roof: from segregation to co-education*. Retrieved on March 10, 2013, from [http://tripalo.hr/knjige/hrvati\\_u\\_bih/brkic.pdf](http://tripalo.hr/knjige/hrvati_u_bih/brkic.pdf)

The survey I have conducted among the school children in 7 primary and secondary schools in B&H contained the citations from the book *Djetinjstvo u ratu* [Childhood in War] (Halilović, 2012), which represents the collection of short testimonies of war survivors from B&H of all nationalities who were children when war in 1990s had broken out in B&H. The selected testimonies for the survey were mainly about friendship, solidarity, love, and little things that made children in war happy. The interviewed children in BH schools gave very emotional and honest comments on what they read about the childhood in war. Out of 354 students who follow Federal framework curriculum and Croat curriculum, 234 showed deep empathy in their comments. 222 students expressed their interest to hear about positive examples of inter-ethnic friendships and solidarity during the war in schools. Students were deeply touched by the friendship in wars. In their comments and impressions they emphasized that the friendships in wars were more honest and stronger, that the people were closer, that they are positively surprised by finding out that religion or nationality were not always important during war times. In their comments, the children blamed schools, government, and even parents because they are divided. Many of them expressed self-criticism because people were better before and they needed basic things to be happy, unlike today's children.

However, assimilation and segregation are still present. B&H Law on Prohibition of Discrimination prohibits exclusion, limitation or preference on any grounds in the educational system. The importance of elimination of discrimination for EU accession is also highlighted in the 2011 EU Progress Report for B&H. Given the need to end discrimination in education for the sake of Rule of Law and European integration, and in accordance with the *Interim Agreement on Accommodation of Specific Needs and Rights of Returnee Children*, B&H authorities should find sustainable and acceptable long term solution in terms of educational policy, which would replace NGS and contribute to the social cohesion among future generations.

#### **How to conquer discrimination? Children know the answer.**

When it comes to long-term solutions, the task of government is quite complicated. NGS has no legal basis to be the solution, because it breaches all abovementioned international instruments and domestic laws by its discriminatory character in the terms of content of textbooks, accessibility and acceptability of education, which consequently provokes the structural and social segregation and assimilation in schools. Some long-term steps are reconsidered in the study on which this brief is based.

One aspect of the solution feasible in short-term could be the **character education**, which is focused on core human values and emotional and social learning (W. Berkowitz, 2005.) This seems as informal solution, but it is still official to some extent, because its implementation requires the permission of ministries. This option does not require a lot of financial resources. Bearing in mind that NGS creates divisive and disintegrative culture of remembrance, the informal storytelling classes in schools where survivors and victims of war of all ethnicities would talk about interethnic solidarity, survival and friendship in war, putting the ordinary human face to past events, could be of the highest importance for

emotional and social development of children in inter-ethnic society. This conclusion is based on the survey conducted among 354 students who follow Croat curriculum and Federal framework curriculum and on their reactions to the statements of those who spent their childhood in war (see the textbox in this document). **They have shown deep empathy, some of them experienced revelation after reading the text from the survey, and they started to reflect critically about past events, themselves and their social environment.** Most of the students (255 out of 354) answered that the media incite antagonism, aggressiveness, suspicion and distance between different ethnic groups, so this is another reason why schools should be the places where the negative influence of media could be dismantled. 304 of them expressed their desire to meet the students of other ethnicities, living in other parts of B&H.<sup>4</sup> Also, according to the representatives of the OSCE B&H, it would be useful to present to students in schools personal stories of people who passed through the war, in order to help students better understand the context of conflict and start thinking in critical manner about its causes and consequences (representatives of the OSCE B&H, personal communication, 2013). Besides surveys in schools, this policy option has been chosen also on the basis of good practices of Shoah Foundation.<sup>5</sup>

Only one small part of the answers from questionnaires is in the textbox. Hopefully, with the help of civil society and with the support from international community, the classes about

<sup>4</sup> I did not have opportunity to visit the schools in Republic of Srpska, because I received the official statement of Ministry of Education in RS, Anton Kasipović, that I am not allowed to conduct the survey in schools at the territory of the Republic of Srpska

<sup>5</sup> In 1994 Steven Spielberg established the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, with the main aim to gather and preserve video testimonies from survivors of the Holocaust. Together with teachers, representatives of Shoah Foundation created the testimony centred lessons. The testimonies of Holocaust survivors were presented to the children throughout the world in the interesting, modern and interactive manner, acceptable for children. When listening to personal stories of survivors, students engage emotionally and identified with them. One research has shown that students became less prone to stereotyping even to 30% after hearing testimonies (Szonyi, A., personal communication, 2013).



friendship, solidarity, and survival in war could be organized, in order to reveal the human stories from the most terrible periods to the children, awake the sentiment of empathy and solidarity, and give them a more realistic picture of the society, which is often hidden behind the prejudices and stereotypes generated by the BH education and public sphere in general. **According to CRC and its General Comments, children have the right to participate in planning and creation of the curricula**, so I hope that their views should be taken into account by their parents, government, international community and civil society, as well as scholars and researchers in this area and other relevant actors.

## Recommendations

**Ministries of education** should allow the pilot project to be conducted in primary and secondary schools. It could be a screening of a documentary about the survival in war as a part of informal curriculum in schools and discussion between the children and survivors, with intense involvement of pedagogues throughout the entire project. It is important to evaluate the ethnic distance among children before and after pilot project – if the project would turn out to be successful, push the idea forward in other parts of B&H and introduce school sections focused on similar topics.

**International community and civil society** should finance and implement the informal story-telling classes in schools, in cooperation with representatives of civil society organisations who had similar experience, if at least one ministry of education gives its consent. **OSCE B&H** should introduce the personal stories of survivors in the project History for the Future – Reconciliation through Education.

**International community and ministries of education** should establish a team of experts that would remove the offensive and inappropriate content from the textbooks from NGS, in accordance with specific goals listed in the

Strategy of development of education in B&H with the Action plan for its implementation 2008-2015

If the future curriculum would be based on the outcomes and cognitive skills of students (according to the information received from Agency for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education), the evaluation of teachers and their methods in relation with the planned and achieved outcomes regarding the students' acquired skills and capacities should also be conducted **by ministries of education**, in order to avoid arbitrary behaviour of teachers and potential appearance of hidden curriculum.

**Constitutional Court of RS and Constitutional Court of FB&H** should reconsider the following: bearing in mind that previous researches pointed out that it is problematic to reconcile the principle of non-discrimination with the right to be educated on mother tongue, if the Constitutions of entities prescribe that there are three official languages and two official scripts, is it a breach of Constitutions of entities if the schools do not use all three languages and both scripts in textbooks and during lectures, since the school is not a private (in most cases), but a public institution?

**International community and civil society** should finance excursions for children living in remote, poor villages, who attend "two schools under one roof", provided that all the children go together, in order to ease the ethnic distance among them.

**Civil society and researchers** should launch a public debate/campaign about the need to end the practice of NGS in order to effectively eliminate discrimination in schools. It is important to have the civil society advocate for informal, testimony based classes in schools, related to inter-ethnic friendship and solidarity in the previous war, considering the will of children to hear these stories and considering the positive effect that these stories have on them in terms of overcoming ethnic barriers, as this study has shown.

## THE VOICE OF CHILDREN:

"Honestly, I almost started crying when I was reading what they had to go through. I would like it if we were united now as they were during the war. Yes, I would like to hear the stories of survivors, because it could help us learn to respect each other, regardless of the religion we belong to. It is something we could all benefit from."

"First of all, parents should educate their children not to be Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, but to be as one. After that, divided schools should be eliminated."

"I am interested to hear the story of people who survived the war; I would like it if the schools could introduce the classes where we could hear about their sentiments during the war. And I would like these divisions between peoples to end!"

"I am sad after reading this text, for the first time I am finding out how much these people struggled, and how hard the times were for them...I would like to hear these stories in our school."

"We could all be as one again, all peoples. I would like to hear these stories, because in that way we could have more realistic image of this world..."

"The stories of love and friendship regardless of the nationality left the strongest impression on me."

"It is very sad and terrifying to hear that the children lost their families and friends just because of three different religions."

"In our school the children are divided on apples and oranges, I think that is not ok and that we are all the same."



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