

Social learning as a Europeanisation tool: Case study Macedonia

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Abstract

Education is the main pillar of society for building values and the well-being of its citizens. Its transformational power is imperative, making it a crucial tool in state policies for efficient and timely transformation of a society ready to face new challenges. The Republic of Macedonia faced numerous challenges while modernising and redesigning its educational programmes, to empower its future generations with skills and knowledge in accordance with the labour market's needs, in the global technological and scientific environment and in promoting European values as new paradigms in the so-called Europeanisation of society. The Macedonian education system experienced some disputable changes: reforms were focused on the quantitative performance of students, and not on the quality or impact of education in building a futuristic society. The republic worked towards the adaptation of the inherited education system to new challenges in a plural democratic society, market economy and an increasingly globalised world.

Keywords: Education, social learning, social cohesion, Europeanisation, Republic of Macedonia.

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1. Socio-Political Setting and Education

Historically, education has never been free of politics; in fact, the two can be very closely intertwined, as '[to] Rousseau and other philosophers of his circles, the campaign for patriotic education was a political campaign. Education was conceived as an essential tool in their attempt to redefine the relationship between state and society' (Wiborg, 2000). Educational reforms in the education system were an important topic in Macedonia in the past 15 years. This question was not by chance one of the main topics in negotiating the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001.

This central position of education in Macedonia shows that there is an urgent need to understand the importance of education for preserving identity development and for development of the corresponding values in the citizen. There were lengthy debates on equality and equal access to education for all communities in their mother tongue. However, the question that arises is whether the debate should only be focused herein? It is obvious that this debate should continue with topics that transcend the exclusive linguistic aspects, the place of study, etc. The methodology and the quality of education should be the focus of attention in ongoing debates and dilemmas related to education.

One of the key contexts of education policy in the EU is social cohesion or basic values such as tolerance, intercultural understanding and respect, dialogue, compromise and others (Paris Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education, 2015). In this declaration, the role of the teacher with adequate competencies in this field is emphasised, because everyone is aware that teachers are a key factor in enabling such an environment.

In the Republic of Macedonia, a system that encourages the establishment of values which enable social learning that is lacking. This may lead to obstacles in the road towards Europeanisation in the future. The aim of this paper is to analyse the potential of education in advancing and facilitating social learning by instilling the values that enable it early on in citizens' development.

2. Educational Indicators in RM for Assessment of the Level of Europeanisation

Equality, as a basic value and universal principle for the realisation of the human rights of education in Macedonia, despite some difficulties, has managed to be promoted to an acceptable and satisfactory level. From a quantitative point of view, at all levels of education, the enrolment of pupils/students in the educational system reflects the ethnic, social and territorial structure of the population. An exception in this context is the coverage of children in preschool education, where the general enrolment and structure of children involved in preschool institutions is far beneath the European standard, although there has been some improvement (15,737 children covered in 2006 to 37,121 in 2015). Also, there have been improvements in the number of institutions (in 2008 there were 187 buildings, which in 2015 increased to 304). While there has been an increase in the enrolment of students, the disadvantaged ethnic composition is identifiable (in 2012 of a total 26,885 children: 25,150 were Macedonians, 1,437 were Albanians, 76 were Turks and 222 belonged to other groups, which means only 5.11% are Albanians, 0.2% Turks, while the number of Roma children is insignificant) (data from the State Statistical Office). This fact is important because of the strong colouration of this context with the quality of education. The external evaluation shows poorer results in the Albanian-language education or other non-majority communities, which associates with low coverage of these children in preschool education.

Quality is also a common denominator of successful education policies. Although difficult to measure, this indicator is the subject of research and analysis for the objectification of knowledge and skills in the learning process. The level of the quality of education is measured by internal instruments in each country separately, and through international instruments for assessment [TIMSS, PIRLS,

Ranking of Universities (Time, Shanghai list), etc.] as a generally acceptable and credible instrument for quality assessment of quality of education. Based on the results from the previous stages of evaluating the quality of performance of our educational system, Macedonia should not be satisfied with the results. They are certainly beneath the expectations.

Table 1. PIRLS – Progress in international reading literacy study

Year	Ranking	State average	International average
2001	29/35	442	500
2006	38/45	442	500

Table 2. TIMSS-trends in international mathematics and science study (science)

Year	1999	2003	2011
Ranking	29/38	31/45	52/59

Table 3. TIMSS-trends in international mathematics and science study (mathematics)

Year	1999	2003	2011
Ranking/Number of participating countries	30/38	30/45	43/59

3. Critical Thinking and Social Cohesion

Critical thinking has proven to be a most effective methodology that provides the most appropriate space for accommodation of various innovative concepts and ideas in children. As such, this pedagogical approach is not really easy to practice and represents an even greater barrier to untrained and unprepared teachers.

This approach becomes even more important in mixed societies, where encouraging modalities and cultivating values aimed at strengthening social cohesion is crucial. In Macedonia ‘despite the significant development of the education system in the past decade in terms of education in the mother tongue, the events are unfolding in the direction that needs to be addressed and corrected to avoid more ethnic estrangement’, says the Strategy for Integrated Education (2008). In these conditions, shortcomings and disadvantages related to the promotion of tolerance, mutual understanding and dialogue are not unexpected. The Macedonian education system is characterised by inadequate curricula, inadequate textbooks (especially in subjects relevant to social cohesion), low level of mutual knowledge, high level of prejudices and stereotypes which lead towards the creation of parallel worlds and a fragmented society.

In Macedonia, there is a good foundation for an integrated approach to education. With the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), a series of legal instruments promoting and strengthening the internal cohesion of society have been created. However, there is still an evident need for finding new mechanisms to enable the implementation of policies aimed at greater interethnic integration in education. Promoting critical thinking and values, which facilitate social cohesion, are the first steps in this direction. Qualitative reforms required for the promotion of social cohesion are important for the wider aspect of Europeanisation of the society (EIP, 2015).

4. Challenges of Education in Macedonia in Terms of its Role Towards Europeanisation

The potential of education as an important pillar of conflict resolution in multi-ethnic societies has been documented and promoted as a tool of conflict resolution through OSCE documents known as The Hague Recommendations, Ljubljana recommendations and others. One of the ways in which Macedonia is lagging behind is that the education system has continually focused on ethnic political agendas while ignoring the importance of civic education and critical thinking.

Civic education in the Macedonian context would not only mean teaching the skills required for the autonomy of the individual but should '[aim] at inculcating in children the habits and values which the good democratic citizen will possess' (Brighouse, 1998), which is what sociologist Amy Gutmann advocates for Gutmann (1999). This is important in the Macedonian context in two ways: it would promote the equality of citizens as within this model, all students would be encouraged towards the contraction of their autonomous selves, and secondly, it would encourage virtues required of a democratic citizen such as tolerance, understanding, dialogue and compromise, values closely associated with what is oftentimes termed as European values. However, these values become even more important if analysed for the purposes of social learning.

5. Education as a Starting Point for Social Learning

The European Union's approach towards Macedonia was initiated within a conflict management framework. This framework according to Tocci (2007) is based upon three pillars: conditionality, social learning and passive enforcement. This paper will focus on social learning where the potential of education is important. Social learning in the Europeanisation literature is conceived in institutional terms. Tocci's framework of social learning constitutes what 'Checkel defined as 'complex learning' which is a process wherein in the absence of clear material incentives, actors obtain new values norms and interest (*ibid.*) as a result of close institutional interaction with the EU' (Katzenstein, 2006), (Pollozhani, 2012). Thus, social learning constitutes of norms and values that may facilitate a country's integration into the EU even when there are no material incentives, but as a result of dose contact and value learning. According to Tocci, actors may choose to change their behaviour and norms to be more accommodating, thus they might choose 'negotiation and compromise and international law over unilateralism' (Tocci, 2007).

However, there are questions as to how social learning takes hold, as 'there is lack of sufficient understanding as to how such a learning might occur considering that it develops over long-term contact with institutions' (Pollozhani, 2012). This process has yet not taken hold in the Macedonia (*ibid.*). As social learning is an effect of the contact between institutions, education might not present a straightforward pillar of study; however, this paper argues they are fundamentally intertwined. A civic education would facilitate the dialogue and compromise required in contact with EU institutions. As the Macedonian education system is quite rigid, the norms and beliefs that are supposed to facilitate social learning are not present. This makes it more difficult for social learning to become an integral and important part of the integration process of Macedonia towards the EU. As integration and complying with EU norms is a long process that continues even after accession, it is important to build the foundation for this social learning to occur. Investing in civic education would serve this purpose as it would inform agents from an early age of the norms and values that can facilitate contact with the EU institutions.

Each country has its own special features that are of a different nature. These peculiarities stem from their historical, cultural, economic and geographical characteristics. Adjusting of these differences to European norms and values is a difficult and painstaking process. In this context, this process is very specific to countries characterised by its ethnic and cultural particularities. In such circumstances, integration, mutual understanding and compromise represent, first of all, the internal need of the country, as a prerequisite for EU integration.

6. Modalities of Social Learning in the Educations System of the Republic of Macedonia

Considering the context of social learning and deficiencies evident in the analysis of educational policies in Macedonia, for the aim of the concrete underpinnings of the process of integration with the necessary elements, educational policies (reform) must be set not only in the quantitative aspects but also in qualitative ones. This means reforming the education system with innovative methods that will encourage critical- and civic-oriented opinion. First of all, the reforms must have in mind the interest of the child and his or her future. And here civic education and critical thinking is very important, because it would allow the children to think as autonomous individuals and as citizens, and not only as a part of an ethnic or socio-economic group. This will allow children to learn openly with one another, and not to be limited by the knowledge of books but be encouraged to practice their knowledge. This setting would facilitate the system to embrace needed values such as compromise and tolerance, making all these universal values to be an integral and indivisible part of the system. Such reforms would result in socio-economic and civil equality in a multi-ethnic and multicultural setting.

7. Conclusion

The future of education, the direction and the dynamic of reforms therein are a global dilemma. Macedonia, as a country where the integration and cohesion of society is still lacking, and which is determined to be a part of the EU, needs innovative reforms to achieve these two goals. Critical learning and civic education would allow the citizens of Macedonia to overcome ethnic and socio-economic divisions and to prepare for their role in a future in society and in institutions as responsible citizens.

Competent and open-minded people with the required skills, convinced of the need for dialogue, compromise and tolerance would help the progress of the country towards and within the European Union. Social learning, an important component of the Europeanisation of the country, can only function in an environment where the institutions are open and accustomed to compromise and debate. Without these prerequisites, the deeper and more important EU reforms even though contained in the laws will not be able to be implemented to the desired extent.

One of the crucial components of educational policies in the EU is social cohesion, namely the fundamental values which enable such cohesion, such as toleration, intercultural understanding and respect, dialogue and compromise. These values are also components of social learning, which are necessary for facilitating the integration of states into the EU, even when there is no material motivation.

Education, even though a priority, is often put aside because it takes longer to see its results, whether good or bad. Their benefit is felt many years after the implementation of reforms. The path towards European integration is long and does not stop with accession; on the contrary, the process continues more intensively after membership. In order to have institutions and citizens able to demonstrate and implement values and practices on the road to EU, education is key. Even though thus far the direction of Macedonia's education system has been towards preserving the ethnic identities and quantitative reforms, in the future, in order to improve the quality of education and equality, Macedonia will have to step towards innovative and qualitative reforms.

Social learning is an important component of Europeanisation and it can only function in an environment where institutions are open and accustomed to compromise and debate. In order to have institutions and citizens that are able to not only demonstrate but also implement values and practices on the path towards the EU, education is crucial.

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