



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**  
**High Commissioner on National Minorities**

**INTEGRATED EDUCATION:  
A WAY FORWARD FOR  
MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETIES**

Address

by

**Knut Vollebaek**

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

at the

South East European (SEE) University

Check against delivery!

Tetovo, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – 29 January 2009

Rector Abazi,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Friends,

It is a great pleasure to talk to you. Temples of learning like the South East European (SEE) University, Babes Bolyai University in Cluj Napoca or the Kyrgyz-Uzbek University in Osh are not only important institutions of higher education. They have become meeting places for different cultures, languages and ideas. As such, their purpose extends beyond pure academic excellence.

Your country has made headway in the past few years in some key areas of education. For example, the system of mother-tongue education has been further developed and the educational rights of different ethnic communities have been increasingly promoted and better safeguarded. The influence of politics on appointments in education has been reduced, while decentralization in education has led to more ethnic community ownership of schools in local municipalities.

Education is the bond that ties us together. It is in school that children from different ethnic backgrounds meet and learn that being different does not mean being an enemy. In fact, many friendships that last a lifetime are born while at school, second and third languages are mastered here and foreign cultures become appreciated.

While the merits of integrated education are universally recognized, separation along ethnic lines in education is growing in many OSCE participating States. Also, in your country, the separation of ethnic communities through parallel education systems is on the increase although it is even more prominent in neighbouring countries.

In September 2005 Trevor Phillips, Chair of the UK's Commission for Racial Equality, warned that the British were “becoming strangers to each other.” He urged for a move away from this “sleepwalking into New Orleans-style racial segregation ... [a] Britain of passively coexisting ethnic and religious communities, eyeing each other uneasily over the fences of our differences.” Among other things, he suggested employing creative solutions to

encourage “white” schools to take larger numbers of ethnic minorities to help to encourage integration.<sup>1</sup>

Jonathan Kozol, an educationalist and writer from the United States, has recently declared that the restoration of apartheid schooling was in full swing in America.<sup>2</sup>

Should we be concerned about this trend? Perhaps the press vilifies segregated education too much? Let us examine together what is happening in our schools and universities and look at the consequences for our societies.

Take academic performance. There is a general consensus among educationalists that the school environment can have a significantly positive or negative impact on students’ learning experiences.

A recent study in the United States has found that students who attend primarily minority schools are not as well prepared for college as their counterparts in mixed schools. Researchers directly link the performance gap to the degree of segregation. Interestingly, the study also found that minority and white students alike positively benefit from exposure to a diverse mix of students in high school.<sup>3</sup>

In multilingual societies, separation has even wider repercussions. Separation results in insufficient opportunities for young people to meet and work together. Separation has a debilitating effect on the development of the necessary language skills. Separation encourages ethnic prejudices to linger on and fester.

Segregated education can cost us dear when it comes to building cohesive societies. Nowhere is this more evident than in Northern Ireland. “The province’s primary and secondary schools systems are divided along religious lines, with Catholic schools on the one hand and ‘state’ schools – attended by 93 per cent of Protestant children – on the other.” Recent research by a group of academics confirmed that these parallel systems produce adults who conform to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Phillips, T., *After 7/7: Sleepwalking to Segregation*, speech given at the Manchester Council for Community Relations, 22 September, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Kozol, J., “Still Separate, Still Unequal: America’s Educational Apartheid”, *Harper’s Magazine*, Volume 311, No. 1864, 2005.

political ideas of their parents. “Collating surveys from 1989 to 2003, they found, for example, that 96 per cent of Protestants who had received a state education saw themselves as ‘British’, ‘Northern Irish’ or ‘Ulster’. More than 90 per cent of Catholic-educated people saw themselves as ‘Irish’ or ‘Northern Irish’.”<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, the study also examined the impact of integrated education which started to emerge in Northern Ireland in 1981. The study has proved that “integrated education tempers the edges of unionism and nationalism.” The sad reality is that “only 4.6 per cent of pupils attend integrated schools, so they can make only a small difference.”<sup>5</sup>

“Sleepwalking into segregation”, to use Trevor Philips's metaphor, is particularly worrisome in those States where until now a largely integrated system has prevailed. Governments, legislators, educationalists and minority leaders must reverse this segregationist trend because it undermines the very basis on which our children to learn build shared societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Integrated education is not only about putting children of various ethnic groups in one classroom. It is about democratic and decentralized school governance. It is about interesting and inclusive textbooks. It is about joint after-school activities.

There is, however, promising news in your country. Citizens are becoming increasingly involved in school governance; they participate in a variety of bodies such as school boards and teacher and parent councils.

You will not have to wait long before you see the benefits of parental involvement. When parents take an interest in their children's schooling, students achieve more academic and social success. Research shows that parents' awareness and interest in their children's

---

<sup>3</sup> Austin, A. and Gustafson, L., “The effect of de-facto public school segregation on college performance”, *Review of Business Research*, November 2008.

<sup>4</sup> O'Farrell, J. “Segregated education in the dock”, *New Statesman*, 27 February 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

education and school activities reinforces the importance of school for their children. This ultimately has a positive impact on student's academic work at all grade levels.<sup>6</sup>

Significant progress has been made in depoliticization of school directors' appointments. I warmly welcome this change and would advocate that this be extended to the appointment of teachers too. Politics has no place in schools.

Equally important is depoliticization of curriculum and textbook development. The school curriculum has to be "kept at arm's length from individual politicians' idiosyncratic preferences", to quote Professor John White of the Institute of Education at the University of London. This is essential if we are to equip pupils "to lead a flourishing personal and civic life in a modern liberal democracy".<sup>7</sup>

This is an area where, in your country, persistent shortcomings in interethnic tolerance need to be rectified. Curricula in multi-ethnic countries must provide a balanced picture of all communities. Textbooks play a crucial part in this process. One-sided or skewed interpretations of sensitive subjects can perpetuate misunderstandings and negative stereotypes.

History is the most obvious victim of political manipulation. Too often, history is presented as a rigid concept. One group is glorified. One truth is taught.

History needs to be "disarmed" in order to foster individual judgment and critical thinking and present a range of sources open to interpretation.<sup>8</sup> In this way, children will realize that histories are constructed rather than given.

Graça Machel who is now married to Nelson Mandela, was married to the President of Mozambique, a country that was ravaged by civil war for many years. In 1996, she presented a ground-breaking report on the impact of armed conflict on children. The report

---

<sup>6</sup> Epstein, J., *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> "Institute of Education – Keep politics out of schools", *The Times Higher Education*, 12 June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> "Disarming History", *Conclusions and Recommendations of the International Conference on Combatting Stereotypes and Prejudice in History Textbooks of South-East Europe*, Visby, Gotland, Sweden, 23 - 24 September 1999.

recommends that national teachers' unions in areas where ethnic conflicts have occurred hold consultations on how to eliminate manifestations of nationalism, anger and aggression from curricula.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the best remedy for biased textbooks is the involvement of teachers in their development. The teachers' experience in the classroom makes them our frontline in the struggle against stereotyping in textbooks. Teachers should be enlisted to review all existing textbooks, particularly on sensitive subjects such as history, geography and languages. In this way negative stereotyping and intolerance will eventually be routed.

This is not to say that textbooks have to shy away from controversy. On the contrary, they need to provide a critical way of presenting such subjects and encourage more analytical and less stereotyped thinking.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My remarks would be incomplete today if I were not to mention the language issue in education.

It is fair to say that the preservation and development of national identity is virtually impossible without instruction in minority languages in secondary schools or, at the very minimum, the teaching of minority languages as a subject on the curriculum.

This is where your country scores high. Students are entitled and able to receive primary and secondary education in their native language, and larger communities can even access higher education in their respective languages.

One drawback of this system, however, is that many young people do not receive adequate instruction in, and exposure to, the Macedonian language. As a result, children often lack a command of Macedonian to a degree that hampers a future successful professional or academic career. If this process of well-intentioned linguistic segregation continues, it could have a long-term detrimental effect on the stability of Macedonian society.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. Report of Graça Machel - Expert of the Secretary-General, United*

Increasing the number of hours of instruction of the Macedonian language in schools to match other languages of instruction would be one option for tackling the problem. Learning Macedonian does not mean that the rights of minorities are less respected by having to learn the State language. Nor does it mean that minorities would study in their mother tongue any less or not learn their mother tongue adequately. Optional courses could be offered in Macedonian so that children can start learning Macedonian much earlier in their educational career. Using the Macedonian language as a medium of instruction is an even more promising option.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education is not a straightforward solution to ethnic separation. Nor is it a silver bullet against all societal ills on its own.

Education needs to be part of a wider national strategy to promote integration and to build a multi-ethnic society. This national strategy should include measures to encourage minority participation in the political and economic life of the state, in political representation and in the broadcasting media. It has to tackle poverty and exclusion. Progress on the broader aspects of integration will make it easier to promote integrated education.

Your university is a launching pad for these ideas and can facilitate their entry into the public debate. Most of the things I have talked about are part of your daily lives. You often share one classroom. You, no doubt, switch easily between languages. You openly discuss your common history in a measured, calm and dignified way.

The positive environment of your university and other multilingual, multicultural institutions must become the mainstream. It is only through integrated education that the walls of separation that are emerging in society will be demolished. I encourage you to face up to this challenge and become the ambassadors of such education in your country.

Thank you for your attention.