"Two Schools under one Roof" in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Exploring the challenges of group identity and deliberative values among Bosniak and Croat students

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenge of engaging Bosniak and Croat students in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in deliberative democracy within the context "two schools under one roof," students receiving education in the same school building, yet attending separate classes and following distinct curricula. Findings suggest that group identity for Bosniak students was strongly tied to "being Bosnian" while Croat students expressed ambivalence and unease about their identity, balancing feelings between having their home in BiH and maintaining their Croat roots. The students' relationships were complicated by an imbalance in perceptions of power, discriminatory attitudes, and economic resources. We argue that the continued separation of youth based on ethnicity hinders the education of future generations for democracy.

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1. Introduction

Democracy is a complex process that must be continuously nurtured and maintained. This is especially true in new democracies where a major issue is not only that of maintenance, but of developing democratic processes from the ground up. Several authors argue that children should be raised to participate in democratic dialog and decision-making (Bråten, 1998; Carleheden, 2006; Wellmer, 1986) and that citizenship education should be mandatory (Carleheden, 2006). From this perspective, educational institutions play a vital role in developing citizens and preparing them for the task of contributing to a well-functioning democracy.

However, there exist a number of contexts where modern democracies are faced with significant challenges in this regard. These challenges are often embedded in conflicts between different cultures or ethnic groups within a nation's boundaries and may prohibit the implementation and development of democracy through education and other arenas. The educational conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are indicative of this type of challenge.

As part of the former nation of Yugoslavia, BiH previously had a unified system of education. However, as a consequence of the Yugoslavian civil war (1991–1995), the current political situation and educational arrangements in BiH are particularly complicated (see Kreso, 2008; also Torsti, 2009). There are currently several parallel systems of education in BiH in which multiple local curricula are in force, which are largely organized around the country's three main ethnic groups: Bosniaks,

Croats, and Serbs (see Clark, 2010). The present study focuses on an educational setting in BiH known as, "two schools under one roof". This refers to an organizational solution in which two essentially different educational systems are physically organized in the same building. Thus, two different ethnic groups (Bosniak and Croat, in the case of this study) attend school in the same building, but are taught under separate administrations, teaching staff, and follow distinct curricula, representing at times competing views of the historical and geopolitical conditions of the country. It seems reasonable to ask how these complex educational conditions might influence the development of democratic processes and young citizens of BiH.

Biesta and Lawy (2006) argue that the education of citizens should take as its point of departure the experiences of youth, focusing on the social, economic, cultural and political context in which they live their lives. Thus, it is assumed that citizenship cannot truly be learned without attention to experiences in both formal and informal communities, including relationships and contexts that are found beyond the walls of the classroom (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009). Citizenship is also connected to the feeling of belonging to a group (Osler & Starkey, 2005), which certainly has the potential to impact the education of young people with regard to preparing them to participate in democratic processes. That young people are given the opportunity to share their experiences and beliefs in an open forum through a process of deliberative debate is considered fundamental for engendering democratic participation and citizenship development (Englund, 2006). Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the challenge of engaging Bosniak and Croat students in deliberative democracy within the context of the "two schools under one roof" educational solution, in the light of (a) group identity and (b) deliberative values. In the following section, we present this theoretical framework as it applies to the context of the investigation.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Group identity

Group identity refers to an individual's knowledge that he or she belongs to a given group and that this membership offers some level of emotional and value significance to him or her (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). Moreover, group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) refers to a shared affiliation to a community, such as a family, culture, nation and so on. Yet, challenges often arise when members of a community hold a sense of belonging, or identity, that is at odds with that of their neighbors and the geo-political boundaries of the nation in which they live. The development of group identity is unavoidably intertwined with factors such as the language of the group, their religious beliefs and traditions, and the organization and practices of institutions with which group members are actively engaged (e.g., schools). Each of these phenomena in turn has the potential to enhance existing divisions between groups in terms of their own self-definition (Durrani & Dunne, 2010) or to bring individuals closer together based on mutually recognizable traits or conditions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, group identity is shaped in a variety of ways. For example, national identity may be promoted through a variety of different channels including media, national holidays, sporting events, and other ceremonies (Osler & Starkey, 2005).

Group identity is also connected to the concept of citizenship. Whereas the traditional view of citizenship emphasizes the rights, duties and practices that define one as a competent member of society (Turner, 1993), citizenship is also understood as the perception of belonging to a particular community or group (Osler & Starkey, 2005; Turner, 1993). In this sense, one's formal status as a citizen is attached to being recognized as a member of a particular state (e.g., citizen and legal resident of BiH). However, like group identity, young peoples' development of their own sense of citizenship is complex and influenced by their experiences with school, family, peers and a great many other conditions (Kerr, 2005). Thus, individual feelings of citizenship vary considerably and do not necessarily adhere to political ideals (e.g., regional or national) or the beliefs and attitudes of other citizens. In order to understand how these different understandings of citizenship might impact the potential for democratic transformation, it is important to consider deliberative processes.

2.2. Democracy as a deliberative process

The goal of deliberative democracy is to arrange for a procedure in which different points of view come forward in a process based on rationality and oriented toward reaching mutual understanding (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1996). Equality among participants and an atmosphere free of coercion are prerequisites if this ideal is to be met (Habermas, 1996, p. 305). From this perspective, the power of the argument is seen as decisive and participants' statements are judged on their ability to meet claims of validity (true, right and truthful). At the same time, participants must be open to changing their minds when exposed to new perspectives under the course of debate (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1996). Dewey (1927) stresses the importance of discussion, consultation and persuasion in democratic decision-making; processes that extend and deepen public awareness of the problems under discussion (Festenstein, 2009). Thus, in a deliberative democracy people are not accidental bystanders, but active citizens in the political process (Osler & Starkey, 2005).

One way to fulfill the school's democratic mission is to offer students experiences with deliberative communication (Englund, 2000), meaning that each individual takes a stand by listening, deliberating, evaluating, and seeking to find common values and norms (Englund, 2006). Students develop reflective attitudes through a process built on core principles: (a) opposing views are presented openly, (b) expressed views always include tolerance and respect, and (c) participants strive to reach at least a temporary agreement (Englund, 2000). Clearly, such ambitious standards are difficult to achieve in the context of countries like BiH, where the division of students is explicitly built into the organization of education and activation in a complex political process is far from straightforward.