

# Building Citizenship in the Midst of Ethnic Conflict

*Terrence C. Mason is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Indiana University's School of Education in Bloomington.*

As the new democratic republics of Eastern Europe experience sweeping transformations in their political, economic and social institutions, their educational systems must also undergo changes to address the new roles and responsibilities of citizens.<sup>1</sup> This article explores the impact of these changes in one Eastern European country—the Republic of Macedonia—by drawing upon research conducted at its South East European University. This research investigates the views of educators in Macedonia who seek to create educational systems and teaching practices that can overcome their country's political challenges and support both democratic values and participatory citizenship. It also explores how civic education curriculum could help them reach these goals.

Just as democracy has been conceptualized in various ways, the precise meaning of citizenship has also long been a subject of debate. In a place like Macedonia, where competing ethnic identities create the potential for multiple or divided allegiances, scholars like Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman have asked the question, "Can citizenship provide a common experience, identity and allegiance for the members of society?"<sup>2</sup> As Macedonia seeks to form its own democracy, it must answer this question while it contends with the legacy of recent ethnic conflicts, which may interfere with the willingness or capacity of citizens to participate in a pluralistic, multiethnic democratic state. This legacy also has implications for how civic education can be carried out in schools and in teacher education institutions to support the development of such a pluralistic, democratic society.

## **South East European University**

The political and cultural conflict prompted by the dissolution of Yugoslavia spread to the Republic of Macedonia in 2001 as tensions between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the ethnic Albanian minority erupted into violence. The antecedents of this conflict are rooted in long-standing cultural and ethnic tensions that, in the wake of the recent violence, are now being addressed. The largely Islamic ethnic Albanian population in Macedonia (approximately 23% of its population) has historically been denied the opportunity to pursue higher education in their native language and has received insufficient preparation in the Macedonian language in school to succeed in Macedonian-language universities.<sup>3</sup> Given this reality, the process of resolving the political conflict has focused on the issues of Albanian language and access to higher education: one outcome has been the creation of South East European University (SEEU).

Established in 2001, SEEU offers courses to more than 4,000 students in several fields, including teacher training.<sup>4</sup> Established by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as a multilingual institution, the university's goal is to provide high quality education for the country's citizens in Albanian, Macedonian and English and to prepare students with the skills and knowledge they need to participate actively in the political, cultural and economic life of the region. The university also offers students the opportunity to explore linguistic, cultural and ethnic differences in a diverse and open setting. As a result, it has the potential to help build a society in which cultural diversity; social, political and economic justice; and democratic values are promoted.

### **Methodology and Data Analysis**

As an advisor to SEEU's Teacher Training Department, I conducted a study to assess students' perceptions of the role of the university and teachers in promoting democracy and interethnic understanding in society. Thirty-one students in SEEU's undergraduate teacher training program—who were preparing to become teachers in the fields of English, French, Albanian, German and Sociology—served as subjects. The following questionnaire was administered to this group, who represented approximately 25% of the Teacher Training students enrolled during the 2002/2003 academic year; 28 were Albanian-speaking, two Macedonian-speaking and one Turkish-speaking. Sixteen respondents were female and fifteen male (which matched the male-to-female ratio in the department as a whole).

1. What were the reasons that you decided to attend SEEU?
2. In your opinion, how can SEEU, through its programs and philosophy, contribute to the resolution of ethnic and social conflict in Macedonia?
3. How will the education you are receiving at SEEU prepare you to participate in a multiethnic, multilingual society?
4. What are the advantages of a university education that is offered in three languages (Albanian, Macedonian, and English)? Disadvantages?
5. How will the kind of teacher training you are receiving prepare you to teach in ways that will reduce ethnic and cultural conflict in Macedonia?
6. What specific concepts or ideas from this course (Multicultural Issues in Education and Cross-Cultural Education and Multicultural Action Research Seminar) have you learned that will assist you in teaching for cultural and linguistic diversity?
7. What do you see as the specific role of teachers in creating an equitable, diverse society? How has this course helped prepare you to assume this role?
8. How do the teaching methods and curriculum at SEEU differ from other universities that you know about? Give some examples. Do you regard these differences as advantages? Disadvantages?
9. What are the major obstacles or challenges facing SEEU in trying to establish a multilingual university? How can these be overcome?

The questionnaire responses were translated from Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish and transcribed into English. Through an analysis of the most common responses to questionnaire items, a set of themes representing significant trends and patterns were identified. These themes, along with statements from the questionnaire responses to support them, are presented here.

### **Results of the Study**

*Cultural Contact and Conflict Resolution.* When asked how their teacher training program will enable them to reduce cultural and ethnic conflict, 61% cited the emphasis on respect for and interaction with those from other cultures. These students expressed confidence that contact with students and faculty from other ethnic groups would bring about change and promote intercultural understanding. Their statements here reflect this view.

*It teaches us how to live together with one another without taking into consideration whether we are Albanians, Turks or Macedonians. But this, I think, will be the place which will erase the hatred that we have nourished for years and centuries toward one another because we will grow up and develop in a European way.*

*Because there are not only Albanian students here; there are mixed students and the university is multiethnic, which means that we can associate, talk and learn more about one another; something more than hatred – because there are people who sow just hatred and nothing else.*

*Language and Cultural Détente.* A consistent theme throughout the responses was the acknowledgment of the power of culture and language to effect change. Many regarded language training, particularly in English, as a necessary tool “to serve as a link or bridge for us all.” When asked how their education at SEEU will prepare them to participate in a multicultural society, the most common response cited the inclusion of multiple languages in the curriculum: “the university is, to some extent, a mirror of multiculturalism.” Another saw language as a vehicle for reducing stereotypical views of others and English as a kind of linguistic neutral ground that can help:

*by getting rid of [lit., pulling out of the head] prejudices against others and by knowing the languages of ethnicities as well as the English language as a mediator.*

*The University as Catalyst for Social Change.* While most students appreciated their own multicultural experience at SEEU, they were somewhat divided in their beliefs regarding the capacity of the university to resolve issues of ethnic and cultural conflict in Macedonia through its curriculum and

programs. Some were confident that the university would provide leadership in establishing a multiethnic, multilingual society.

*In my opinion, yes, this university will be the one that will help us resolve the social and ethnic conflicts since it has students of various nationalities. Such a variety is the pillar for getting to know one another without any prejudice...*

*Working together on the differences and the similarities between the communities is one way to understand each other. Only by correct attitude and a fair approach to all students can the trust and the tolerance between the ethnic communities be built again.*

However, a persistent skepticism was evident among some respondents who felt that the university and politics should not mix. While not the majority, some expressed doubt that the university could serve as an effective vehicle for change in society and favored a more politically neutral position for the university.

*[T]he program and the philosophy of the university should not contribute to the resolution of social and ethnic conflicts in Macedonia, nor should it do the contrary. Politics should not [have an] influence on education.*

One student felt that the university's approach would hinder rather than help the cause of ethnic reconciliation.

*No, actually it [the university's language policy] leads to conflict.*

In addition, while most students supported the concept of a multiethnic, multilingual university, some expressed a continued desire for a monolingual, Albanian-language university. Thus, tendencies toward Albanian nationalism were evident among some of the students. For example,

*The idea [to have] a multilingual university is relatively good, but taking into consideration our Balkan mentality, this transition evolves very slowly. Unfortunately, we Albanians here need a state university, not a private one, and it doesn't have to be multilingual. Thus, the problems can be overcome only by settling on the issue of a state university.*

While seemingly confident in their own ability to learn from SEEU's multicultural environment, students were less certain that others—who had not chosen to participate in a multilingual environment—would be susceptible

to the university's lessons of cultural diversity, tolerance and democratic cooperation.

### **Civic Education for Changing Conceptions of Citizenship**

Given Macedonia's recent history, a conflict exists between citizens' political identification with the nation-state of Macedonia and their ethnic national identity (for example, Albanian nationalism). To answer Kymlicka and Norman's question, citizenship does not yet provide a common experience and allegiance for Macedonians. In this section, I will explore how civic education—specifically the *Project Citizen* curriculum—could help Macedonians begin to build such a common experience by helping them establish interethnic understanding and build their sense of agency to effect political change. *Project Citizen 5* is a curriculum program designed to introduce students to issues of public policy and civic engagement through participation in an in-depth inquiry into a specific issue within their community. In doing so, teachers guide students through the following steps: (1) identifying public issues in the community; (2) selecting a problem for class study; (3) gathering information on the problem; (4) developing a class portfolio; (5) presenting the portfolio; and (6) reflecting on the experience.

**Establishing Interethnic Understanding.** Questionnaire respondents revealed a clear need for ethnic reconciliation within the communities of Macedonia. Therefore, *Project Citizen* would be most effectively used in the Macedonian context if teachers and students could be engaged in projects related to the issues of building tolerance, improving cross-cultural communication, reducing prejudice and stereotyping, and finding ways for positive forms of interaction. While other aspects of the curriculum would promote general habits of democracy—for example, critically evaluating public issues and participating in group deliberation to arrive at potential solutions to real community problems—only activities focusing on issues related to tolerance would address the specific knowledge, skills and dispositions most needed by citizens in contemporary Macedonia.

However, while the *Project Citizen* curriculum can enhance civic knowledge and skill in the ways outlined above, the program also incorporates some practices that may not always promote the kind of democratic values it intends. For example, by requiring a class to arrive at a single solution to the public policy problem they select, the opportunity to explore multiple solutions and evaluate their relative effects is not made available to students. As a result, an overemphasis on "majority rule" may be promoted. As we introduce *Project Citizen* to students in countries like Macedonia, we must consider whether this overemphasis on consensus and the minimizing of minority views is an idea that we want to promote, particularly in societies where the issue of minority rights is so salient.

**Building Citizen Agency.** Regardless of where it is carried out, *Project Citizen* brings home the message that "all politics are local." By focusing on real

community issues, students learn that individuals and groups can affect public policy at various levels, but particularly in students' own communities and neighborhoods. We know from our own experience in the United States that learning how to engage in public affairs, to advocate for one's rights, and to form coalitions with others to effect change are skills that do not naturally occur. The only institution we have to effectively teach such skills and to educate students "not just to behave in accordance with authority but to live up to the democratic ideal of sharing political sovereignty as citizens" is the school. [6](#) As societies such as Macedonia emerge from highly centralized and bureaucratic forms of government, the concept of personal agency and responsibility are crucial tools that will help them to achieve this goal. By focusing on the habits of democracy that form the basis of civic education programs (like *Project Citizen*), the civic mission of schools can be accomplished.

However, to fully appreciate the power of active civic engagement, students must do more than develop action plans, displays, and portfolios and enter into competitions. These plans must be enacted by students in their communities. In many cases, certainly those that are the most educationally powerful, students do actually carry out their *Project Citizen* action plans and have a meaningful impact upon their communities. This should be the norm rather than the exception, particularly if the intent is for the problem-solving, group participation, and reasoning skills to transfer to other settings and contexts. Furthermore, if the issues that students address in their *Project Citizen* work are to truly influence the society as a whole, the topics themselves should be those that best reflect the urgent issues facing the society. For example, in Macedonia students should be encouraged to seek solutions to problems that can assist in the process of reconciliation between the various cultural and ethnic groups within the society (for example, Macedonians, Albanians, Vlach and Roma) since conflict between these groups constitutes an enduring and unresolved social problem.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

It is evident from the questionnaire responses here that those surveyed in the study are, for the most part, committed to the ideas of pluralism, diversity, ethnic tolerance and the resolution of the social problems facing Macedonia. They express confidence that the kind of education they are receiving at SEEU will be of benefit to themselves as well as the society as a whole. They believe that the experience of cross-cultural contact and a multilingual education will prepare them for the kind of social, civic, and economic participation that will be needed in a multicultural and "European" Macedonian society of the future. They appear convinced that language matters and that the mastery of the two principal languages of the Republic as well as English will be essential for their own prosperity and that of the country as a whole.

However, the question of whether Macedonian-speaking and ethnic Albanian citizens of Macedonia can achieve an integrated, pluralistic society remains

open. It is apparent from this study that many students at SEEU recognize the value of inter-ethnic and inter-linguistic contact and that the education they are receiving will prepare them to participate in such a society. Students' opinions on this issue were mixed; some expressed optimism while others appeared wary of political forces exerting an undue influence on the university and its policies.

As prospective teachers, the respondents to this survey acknowledged that they must adopt contemporary pedagogical methods that are consistent with the needs of a modern, global society, and they are aware of the model they need to provide to the younger generation. They seem, however, uncertain about the role that schooling should play in a democratic society for transmitting positive social and civic values. This may be an area where the educational system as a whole needs to focus greater attention. Recently, efforts have begun to include training in the use of *Project Citizen* in pre-service teacher education programs, including that of SEEU. By learning how to identify and take action in resolving community problems, future citizens will gain a sense of empowerment and efficacy that may help to create a stronger sense of unity and common experience among ethnic groups.

Many challenges remain for SEEU, including the continuing struggle to define how the three languages are actually incorporated into the curriculum and which courses are offered in which languages to which students. According to the results of this study, in spite of the obstacles SEEU faces, it appears to be making important advances toward bridging the gap between cultural groups in Macedonia and achieving intercultural understanding. The results of this study also suggest that progress toward the resolution of the kind of social and political conflicts such as those occurring in Macedonia can be made through providing contact among diverse cultural groups and by offering educational programs in multiple languages.

© 2005 IFES

\* A longer version of this article will appear in T. C. Mason (in press), "From the Balkans to the Baltics: Challenges for Civic Education in two Eastern European Countries," *The International Journal of Social Education*.

### **Notes**

**1** S. Castles, "Migration, Citizenship, and Education," in J. Banks (ed.), *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 22-39.

**2** W. Kymlicka & W. Norman, "Return of the citizen: A survey of recent work on citizenship theory," *Ethics*, 104:2 (1994), 355.

**3** J.A. Van Fleet, S. Chernenkoff, L. Fajfer, and J. Gomez, *Macedonia: Assistance to Higher, Minority, and Bilingual Education, Site Visit Final*

*Report, The Global Bureau, Human Capacity International Center, U.S. Agency for International Development, 2000.*

**4** *SEEU also offers courses in Legal Studies, Public Administration, Communication Sciences and Technologies and Business Administration. See Southeast European University Catalogue. (2001/2002), Tetovo, Macedonia.*

**5** *Center for Civic Education, We the People...The Citizen and the Constitution (Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 1998).*

**6** *A. Gutmann, Democratic Education. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.1987), 51.*