

From mathematics to psychosocial work: personal reflections on a decade of psychosocial work with children in Kosovo

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The author of this field report, originally a professor in mathematics, describes in a personal report how oppression and violent conflict in Kosovo effected a change in his career, and how he became the founder and director of a local nongovernmental organisation in the field of education and psychosocial support for children. After the conflict, many psychosocial activities were organised. Unfortunately, local experience was often ignored in these projects. After more than a decade of experience, the author stresses the pivotal role of teachers as the key agents in improving psychosocial support to children. Further, he emphasises the importance of strengthening local capacity, rather than international agencies implementing projects with expatriate staff.

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Early in my career, I had never thought that I would become involved in psychosocial projects. My interest grew out from necessity. My original speciality is mathematics, and I have written several books on it. In the late 1980s, I became the director of the Pedagogical Institute in Kosovo. However, it became impossible to continue in my field because of the political oppression of the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo, to which I belong. The rights of the Albanians in Kosovo came increasingly under threat, particularly when Slobodan Milosevic came

to power in 1986. The authorities increasingly curtailed the autonomy of the Kosovar educational system, and tried to force the Albanian speaking population to abandon education in their own language. In 1990, the Serbian government stopped financing all Albanian educational institutions, and I became unemployed. The directors of all of those schools were fired, and replaced by Serbians. Albanian speaking teachers and students were not even allowed to enter any of the primary or secondary schools, or university buildings, where Serb children attended classes.

In February 1991, we organised an action to enter school buildings that stood empty. Neither the teachers, nor the students, carried weapons. We had only our books. Soldiers and tanks stood in front of the school building, and used their weapons against us. Several people were wounded, and some were even killed.

The lack of access to the educational system became a focus for the Albanian resistance. We organised an underground 'parallel system' of education. We had no buildings, and held classes in our private houses, in attics and in basements. We met under the continuous violence of the Serbian police forces. My colleagues and I were mistreated, and physically injured and jailed, simply for attempting to educate our children.

The situation in Kosovo worsened in 1998, when the Kosovo Liberation Army entered the province and the Serbian army began the massacres of Albanians. In 1999, I was in the village of Sllovi when a terrible attack took place. Dozens of people were killed. My family and I were almost killed too. Six weeks after the NATO strikes began, I fled Kosovo and became a refugee in Macedonia. I witnessed how everyone had been affected mentally by the uprooting, and I became increasingly occupied with how violence had affected the minds of the children and the teachers. Realising that psychosocial support was very much needed, I vowed that my first priority after the war would be to contribute to healing the mental wounds of my people.

Helping teachers to help children

In Kosovar society, the role of teachers is pivotal when it comes to the psychosocial wellbeing of children. A teacher has multiple roles. As well as being an educator and a role model for many children, he or she is also usually a parent themselves, and a respected and influential member of the community. My wish was to use an already existing resource, the school pedagogue, to support the teachers in improving the wellbeing of children. Every school in Kosovo had a pedagogue, whose task it was to monitor the quality of the learning process, and to assist teachers working with children with learning disabilities (or other difficulties), and to provide help for the children and their parents. In fact, what they were supposed to do *was* a kind of psychosocial work, but at that time we did not use such words. Unfortunately, the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), who administered Kosovo after the war, decided to leave out the position of the school

pedagogue. The UNMIK considered this position to be an old fashioned relic from the socialist era, and wanted to rebuild the school system from zero, ignoring what had been built during the decades before. This was a mistake. I was very upset by this attitude, but could do nothing to change it. The result was that the schools in Kosovo were left without helpers to provide psychosocial support for either the teachers, or the students.

In 2000, with initial support of Care International, I established a local, nongovernmental organisation (NGO), the Centre for the Promotion of Education (QPEA). This organisation aims to protect the psychosocial wellbeing of children, and to promote their education. The most important way to pursue that goal is to assist teachers to positively influence school children's wellbeing, and to deal effectively with children in difficulties. The role of teachers in Kosovar society and culture is considered so central to the wellbeing of children, in this case it is essential to work primarily with them. For this reason, we believed that training teachers would have a significant impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of children, and on reconciliation. We do sometimes work with parents directly, but usually we work with the teachers to act as an intermediate to work with parents. We have organised many activities, that have been described in more detail elsewhere (Lekaj et al, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c). One of the most important activities are the psychosocial and psycho-pedagogic seminars for teachers, parents and youth volunteers. Through these seminars we have increased the awareness and the skills of the teachers, and others. We have organised hundreds of such seminars, and 13,600 teachers in Kosovo (about two thirds of all teachers in the country) have participated.

Developing a multi-layered system of support

Our experience is that effective child mental health protection needs a bottom-up approach. I believed it was essential to start with the development of a basic psychosocial protective network (in schools, primary health care services, and with volunteer groups). These groups would be able to identify children with problems, and provide a basic assistance that we have found effective for many children. Of course, not all problems can be dealt with at such a basic level. During the seminars, teachers often mentioned that they had difficulties working with the children with traumas, learning difficulties and/or special needs. There was no specialised care for these children. Therefore, in 2003, we founded counselling centres to provide such specialised assistance to the children with more severe, or complex, problems. We now have eight such centres, staffed by a variety of professionals such as psychologists, paediatricians, psychiatrists, social workers, speech therapists and pedagogues. This work is not only done within the walls of the centres; we organise outreach visits to schools in more remote areas, as well as organising activities for parents, etc. For example, in Skenderaj and Glogovac (poor areas in Kosovo that were very much affected by the violence), the outreach services are the only way for the children from those areas to have access to child mental health services (Lekaj et al., 2009b).

The introduction of child-centred ways of working takes time. Within the previous system, the child was perceived to be simply a passive recipient, and not as an actor who could contribute to the process. Sometimes we face opposition from teachers who have difficulties with our focus on child participation. However, generally it is well

received. Contrary to what people may think, a child friendly approach is very compatible with Kosovar culture. We encourage children to express their views. During our outreach activities, we include children in the visits, and in our activities in schools and the community. This has an empowering effect.

Building on local resources

At the end of the conflict, many psychosocial programmes were developed. They all suffered from the usual weaknesses in (post)-conflict settings: a lack of coordination and a concentration of activities in the urban areas. Few activities were organised in the most remote areas, where the majority of the atrocities had occurred. It is unfortunate that in the first years after the conflict, not enough was done to strengthen grass root local resources for psychosocial support (such as schools and primary health care services). I have witnessed many international organisations which come to Kosovo, relying on their own experiences as the starting point, instead of the specific needs of the communities. I do not blame any particular individuals for that, as I know that sometimes the organisations were under tremendous pressure to deliver quickly. Yet, it is very sad that not enough was done to strengthen local structures, so that the Kosovar people could continue the work after the international organisations left. When programmes are implemented primarily by international experts, the impact is often only seen during the time the programme is implemented. It does not have any sustainability, as it is not based on training local (human) resources to continue for a longer term. Of course, the expertise, consultations and professional experience of international experts is also invaluable to our new

country. QPEA has built local (human) resources with the help of such experts, particularly Dr. Anica Mikuš Kos, a child psychiatrist from Slovenia.

It is also sad to see that some of the investments for financial aid return to the donor countries, in the form of high salaries for their expatriates. I work at the Ministry of Education, and I know that the salary costs for an expert from the European Commission is very high. From the War Trauma Foundation, in the Netherlands, we received a budget of around 42,000 Euros, the equivalent of two months salary for an EC consultant. With that money, QPEA was able to train 15 local professionals over a one year programme, install 20 coordinators in schools, pay three staff members and organise 40 one day seminars for 600 teachers and 200–300 parents.

I am very proud of what we have achieved with QPEA. We have only three full time staff. More than 50 others, all Kosovars, work with us in part time positions. In this way, we are able to work very effectively and at a low cost. With support of international partners, we have published many resource materials in the Albanian language (Mikuš Kos, 2008). It is also important that, as an NGO, we have established very close working relations with the local and national authorities. We are involved in many policy issues around education and the psychosocial wellbeing of children.

Reconciliation

I am happy that the minorities in Kosovo, such as Serbs, Bosnian, Turk, and Gorani have the rights to receive an education in their own mother tongue, and with an appropriately adapted curriculum. Within our NGO's activities, a variety of different ethnic groups participate. One problem is

that the tensions between the Serbian minority and the Albanian majority in Kosovo are still very high. At this moment, in our programmes, we are not able to work directly with the Serbian minority, particularly in the Northern part of Kosovo (around Mitrovica). However, we do cooperate with Serbian partner organisations. For example, we have projects with a Serbian NGO on mine risk education and child's rights. We include both Albanians and Serbs as participants in the summer camps outside Kosovo. Yet, due to the extreme sensitivities, is still not possible to organise ethnically mixed summer camps for children in Kosovo. This is painful. Reconciliation on a personal level is still sometimes difficult because so much has happened. Immediately after the war, I was easily upset just by hearing the Serbian language. Now I can speak Serbian with the Serbians, and can visit them. However, time does not heal all wounds. We try to overcome them, but it is not easy. In general, I am optimistic that we can overcome the divisions. We see that, slowly, relations are improving.

Sometimes I still miss my old work as a professor in mathematics. I wrote several textbooks on the subject, and sometimes it makes me sad that I could not continue in that field. But I am proud of all that QPEA has achieved.

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