

The development of primary education in the city of Elbasan from 1920 to 1924

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Abstract

This paper aims to be a reflective contribution to the history of the school in Elbasan, where complex historical and political issues have united many intellectuals, who in order to overcome the differences between them tried to transform education in this city. The reconstruction of the history of consolidation and development of education is important because these formative-educational institutions have played an important role in preserving the Albanian collective memory.

The Albanian school is born and developed in difficult conditions and for this reason we judge that it becomes a bearer of the problems of the past and at the same time a projector of the Albanian future. These pages aim to present a detailed overview of the development of education and educational policies that took place during the period from 1920 to 1924 in the city of Elbasan.

As one of the cities with the greatest contribution to the development of education in Albania, Elbasan, during this period, will become one of the promotion centres of a democratic and secular education. We will first dwell on the historical and social context, highlighting the contribution of prominent figures to then move on to the elaboration of the main features of education in this city. Given the complexity of the argument certainly these pages do not claim to be exhaustive. They aim to be a contribution to building the history of the school in Elbasan.

Keywords: history, education, Elbasan, political context, democratization of education.

Introduction

The history of the city of Elbasan (a city located in the heart of Albania) and especially that of education in this city is full of important events, which occupy a special place in national history. In the early '20s, the prefecture of Elbasan was one of the largest and most important in Albania. It became a hotbed of war for social, political and cultural emancipation. Involved, like the whole country, in the great movement of the Renaissance, Elbasan made a valuable contribution to the process of forming the national knowledge, education and national ideas. It was the intellectual environment of this city, as a result of many years of accumulation and cultivation, that strongly supported the educational and, cultural movement and that influenced the important developments in the field of knowledge. An authentic evidence that reflects and testifies to the psychosocial and intellectual environment of Elbasan are the notes of Edith Durham, where among other things she states: *“In Elbasan you get touched*

by the efforts made for knowledge and culture. You find people who, without any help, give and take with French and even German grammar. There are a large number of educated and knowledgeable people... In Elbasan there are not only words... Elbasan dreams of a bright future, and its very position in the centre of the country would be ideal for the capital... "¹

The scholars have emphasized that "the need to unite all the educational forces of the country, under the same flag, to create a unified national school dictated the holding of the Educational Congress of Lushnja. This congress took place from August 15 to August 24, first in Lushnja and then in Elbasan, and was represented by dignified figures from Elbasan, such as Aleksandër Xhuvani (chairman), Ahmet Gashi, Thoma Papapano, Ilia Sheperi, etc. The decisions of the congress are mainly of the technical sphere of the Albanian school, of the educational policy and for the expansion of the school². Also, in this congress it was decided that all schools in Albania must work with the same program, which led to the unification of the school content. Among other things, the decisions taken focused on primary education, as the level of education was quite low. Thus, it was decided that the primary school in cities would have five classes, and, in villages, four classes. In the decisions taken, the number of textbooks for each class and their type was determined. "The educational congress of Lushnja was an important step forward made at the right time. It overcame the division of schools by regions and laid the foundations of the unification of the state school for the whole country as well as its organization on a scientific basis."³

The '20s are years of significant changes in the Albanian political life. Thus, in the middle of 1922, Albania was in a new historical stage, whose basic task was to fight against the remnants of feudalism and democratization of life in all areas. The political alliance reached in Lushnja in 1920 was broken up and, progressive and conservative political groups appeared in the National Council. The Catholic clergy had stepped up efforts to increase the number of its schools in Albania. In this socio-political context, the Educational Congress of 1922 carried out its activities. It was opened on July 22 in Tirana and worked under the motto of advancing the unification of the school, but now on another sound secular-democratic basis. Efforts for inclusive education on a national basis were also supported by the press of the time, which through the writings of prominent figures of knowledge encouraged and accompanied the efforts made in both educational congresses to elaborate the platform of the democratic movement for the school.

The congress decided that primary education should be compulsory and with six classes, divided into three periods, two years each, while gymnasiums should last 6 years, after primary school. The congress also decided to "publish a pedagogical magazine, which would be charged to the "Teachers' Centre "and would be permeated in a democratic spirit."⁴ The new curriculum "would exert its influence on the relationship between morality and religion in school, and from then on morality would forever remain on the curriculum, while the teaching of religion was reduced to 50%."⁵ Sali Ceka, one of the most prominent teachers of Elbasan, was a strong and

¹ Edith Durham, *Brenga e Ballkanit*, Tiranë, 8 Nëntori, 1991, f. 81.

² Xhevat Repishti, "Kongreset arsimore të viteve 1920-1924", *Studime historike*, Tiranë, 1970, nr.2, f. 64.

³ Instituti I Studimeve Pedagogjike, *Historia e arsimit shqiptar I*, Tiranë, 1990, Libri Shkollor, f. 315.

⁴ Instituti i Studimeve Pedagogjike, *Historia e arsimit shqiptar I*, Tiranë, 1990, Libri Shkollor, f. 322.

⁵ E. Koliqi, *Historia e Arsimit dhe e Mendimit Pedagogjik Shqiptar*, Prishtinë 2002f. 353.

well-argued speaker on the harms of clerical education in the educational congress of 1922. To the efforts of this personality were added those of other figures from Elbasan such as Ahmet Gashi and Qamil Bala, who also strongly demanded and supported the secularization of the Albanian school.

Another important moment in the history of the development of education in Albania was the June Revolt of 1924, in which teachers also participated, which aimed, among other things, to improve education. In this regard, in point 19 of the program announced by the Democratic Government of Noli, it was stated: "Organizing education on a modern, national and practical basis in order for patriots and good workers to emerge from our schools."⁶ Immediately after this decision, a real popular movement began to expand education throughout the country. It was the new education congress that put pressure on teachers to put the government in front of the demand to implement the tasks of the progressive movement for education. The initiative for the congress was taken by the teachers of the Normale School of Elbasan on behalf of A. Xhuvani. It was held in Tirana on August 12-21, 1924. The Congress drafted and published the "Declaration of the teachers of Albania" and decided to establish the teachers' union under the leadership of Kiço Konomi as chairman, Ahmet Gashi as vice-chairman. This connection aimed at education, its democratization, the complete unification of school compulsion, the complete nationalization of education.

The development of education in Elbasan between 1920-1924

As it can be seen from what we presented above, the years 1920-1924 are known as the period of expanding efforts within the war for the democratization of the school and of the Albanian pedagogical thought. The democratic movements were led by intellectuals and professors who faced determined and continuous challenges to make significant changes in education and to give all citizens the right to education. Even earlier, during the period when the city of Elbasan was under Austro-Hungarian occupation, Elbasan intellectuals did not stop trying to develop education and culture in Elbasan.⁷

New curricula were introduced in the schools, which were adaptations of French curricula. In the spirit of democratization, it was fought for economic and social progress, for the development of national education, for the expansion and strengthening of the school with a national, democratic and secular spirit. But it should be noted that achieving these goals was not easy. There were a few who under the conservative spirit tried to hinder the progress of the country, to fight in every way the development and strengthening of the secular state school.

Based on the decisions of the congress, there would be changes in the structure of the school, creating a school with a common physiognomy and content for the whole

⁶ *Historia e arsimit shqiptar I*, vep. e përmendur, f. 338.

⁷ The Habsburg Empire paid attention to the problems of education and culture in Albania in its areas of influence, giving Albanians cultural autonomy. In this field for the spread of education and culture during this period, Elbasan intellectuals, such as A. Xhuvani, L. Nosi, publicists such as S. Ceka, E. Matraxhiu, J. Haxhimima, became active participants and used the opportunities created by Austro-Hungarian authorities posing problems and organizing activities for school and culture in Elbasan. In this regard, it took a series of measures in the field of education of Albanians.

country. The school network was expanded throughout the country and also in the city of Elbasan. In the academic year of 1921-1922, Elbasan was represented by one high school, Normalja, one lower secondary school and six primary schools.

During the years 1920-1924 in Elbasan, we still do not have a proper preschool system.⁸ Despite the fact that it dates back to the end of the 19th century, when there was a preparatory class near the Turkish schools, called "Harriçe", this preschool system would be strengthened in the coming years. In 1920, with the help of the American Red Cross, a kindergarten was opened in Elbasan where both girls and boys went⁹.

The primary education system underwent significant changes, with new steps being taken. Thus, the network of primary schools was expanded, the number of students in them was increased and the professional preparation of teachers was improved. Here we can mention the school "Zgjimi", the continuation of the first Albanian school in Elbasan, the school "Agimi", the continuation of the school of "Qoshe", the school "Kostandin Kristoforidhi", or the school of Kala, the primary school for women "Drita" and two boys' primary schools. In these schools in the early '20s of the 20th century, students were taught by talented and very capable teachers, such as: Fetah Ekmeçi, Dhimitër Paparisto, Josif Shuteriqi, Dhimitër Dodbiba, Petër Dodbiba, Fot Papajani, Agni Todri, Shefikat Narazani, etc¹⁰.

Based on the decisions of the educational congresses in the schools of Albania and in particular in those of Elbasan, the compulsory teaching of religion was abolished, leaving it optional. The partisans of the national secular school, continuing the Renaissance tradition, saw the existence of the subject of faith in the curriculum and the private schools which in most cases were in the hands of the clergy, as very serious obstacles to the democratization of the school. School teachers in Elbasan fought vigorously against religious views.

The primary system in Elbasan in 1920 became compulsory with five classes, only to return with six classes in 1922 (based on the decisions of the educational congresses). The personalities of Elbasan propagandized and emphasized the great importance of education as the only way to progress and development: *"No one can deny that great countries have had the source of their progress from education. In the same way, our mother country's progress will flourish from education. Education is what protects the country from agriculture, trade, crafts and more."*¹¹ Likewise, with the same spirit they value and appreciate our national language and demand its use throughout the country, from Shkodra to Delvina. In the article "Gjuha kombëtare", in the newspaper "Shkumbini" on February 11, 1921, the director of this weekly wrote: *"Go out to entertain the soul in the garden of your literature; learn to curse in Albanian. Albanian is easy, beautiful, it is your mother tongue; It is your job to learn that it nurtures you, Albanian is prospering day by day, it is bettering itself; It is a shame for you, high officials, that your writers know the language better than you do."*¹²

⁸ Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë, *Fjalori enciklopedik shqiptar*, Tiranë, 1985, f. 509.

⁹ Gazeta "Dielli", Boston, Mass. 1922, 23 gusht, f 4.

¹⁰ We should mention that lesson in primary schools was done in difficult conditions. Classes were not comfortable. The most needed equipments for lesson were absent. Teachers worked in bad conditions and low wages.

¹¹ Revista "Normalisti", Elbasan, 1921, nr. 4, f.16.

¹² Gazeta "Shkumbini", Elbasan, 1921, e premtë, 11 shkurt, f.2.

One of the most important efforts in the process of democratization of education was that which had to do with the content of the school, where the school program was proposed and drafted by the Elbasan trio: Qamil Bala, Ahmet Gashi and Sali Ceka. The school curriculum was based on a principle in all schools, from the lowest to the highest. The program aimed at the scientific strengthening of the school and its connection with life, where the principle of concretization and scientific experimentation took precedence.¹³ For primary schools, civic knowledge was provided, which included the political organization of the state, knowledge of political economy, which aimed for the student to have theoretical preparation in this regard when finishing primary school.¹⁴ Also, the program always required an active attitude of the child's mind for his education and for the study of all subjects in the teaching process, thus ending the verbal method of school scholasticism.

Special attention was paid to the teaching of the first grade, where according to the approved platform, the teaching *"should inspire children with a common goal, because it should take children beyond home life, school life, and away from those habits that could prevent a good deed; to lay the foundation for the actions to be taken in other classes. The lesson should not be done on the meaning but also on the will of the children when this awakens the general interest!"*¹⁵

Morality separated from religion now stood as a separate subject from the first grade. Students in this class were taught only Abetare and Arithmetic. Abetare contained all the basic knowledge that belonged to the first grade, "where children had to learn how to read, write and relate these two lessons to each other."¹⁶ Included was also the learning of drawing, and crafts work.

The subjects taught in the primary classes were:

- Primary period, from 7 to 9 years:
- Morality, writing, French, history, geography, arithmetic, arithmetic, geometry, hygiene, the first lessons of agriculture, drawing, crafts, sewing, physical education.¹⁷
- Medium period from 9 to 11 years:
- Morality, reading, writing, French, history, geography, geometry, arithmetic, practical cooking and cleaning, drawing, technology, crafts, physical education.
- Upper period from 11 to 13 years:

Moral and civic teaching, singing, writing, French language, history, geography, arithmetic, geometry, natural sciences, hygiene, crafts, technology, drawing, physical education.

In the third and fourth grade (7-11 years old) the teaching of morality had as its main goal the tasks in the family, at school and towards the homeland, towards oneself for spiritual purity, relations with others. While in the fifth and sixth grade there were regular lessons on general morality and social morality, with family themes.

In the primary grades, the subject of "History" was national history, which provided a great benefit, especially since it was easier to be learnt by students, thus surpassing

¹³ Revista "Hylli i dritës" Tiranë, 1922, korrik, nr. VII, f.3.

¹⁴ XhevatRepishti, Kongresetarsimoretëviteve 1920-1924, *Studimehistorike*, Tiranë, 1970, nr. 2, f. 70.

¹⁵ Revista "Kumtariarsimuer", Tiranë, 1921, nr. 2, f.3.

¹⁶ *Kumtariarsimuer*; Tiranë, 1921 maj-qersauer, nr. 3-4, f.2.

¹⁷ Revista "Revistapedagogjike", Tiranë, 1922, shtatuer, nr. 1, f. 4.

the teaching of history in chronological order¹⁸. Admission of teachers in primary schools was made base on certain criteria. Issue 3 of 1921 in the magazine "Kumtar i arsimuer" stated that teachers should not be younger than 18 years old and had completed at least five primary classes and one normal class. The transfer of teachers from one category to another was done by exams¹⁹. Paying attention to the scientific and pedagogical preparation of teachers, courses were applied to help improve the teaching process.²⁰

Important in this context was the help of the American Red Cross,²¹ which in April 1922 set up a night school with two levels.²² The first was preparatory, and there would be 50 illiterate students, and the second with 40 students, who could read and write. The books would be given to the poor students for free, significantly contributing to the development of education and the social development of our city. At a rally in America, Mr. Erickson (American Christian missionary in Albania) states, among other things: *"You must know that this nation is a beautiful lily, but long surrounded by thorns, which do not let it leave its scent of sweet. Let us run to uproot the thorns on his back, and then the civilized world will see how sweet this lily is."*²³

As for the secondary system in the period from 1920 to 1924, it is represented by the Normale school. The National Government of Lushnja, respectively the Ministry of Education, on August 20, 1920 decided to reopen the Elbasan Normale. Elbasan, through the Normale School led by Aleksandër Xhuvani, became an important centre for the implementation of the decisions of the educational congress. In 1920, after the continuous efforts of the people of Elbasan, to oppose the unjust decision of the Ministry of Education, for the closure of the Normale, Sotir Peci (Minister of Education) notifies the school directorate on 20/10/1920 that with decision of the National Council, no. 185, opens this year the Simple Normal school, which would have a preparatory order. Thus, the Normal School of Elbasan was reopened, but classes began in January 1921 due to the earthquake that hit Elbasan hard. The teachers of Elbasan, endowed with democratic views, became an example for their anti-feudal and anti-religious attitude. At the top of them were the professors of Normale, who through efforts to develop teaching on the most scientific basis, fought for the democratization of the school. In the academic year 1920-1921 in Normale the compulsory teaching of religion was abolished.

In addition to the Normale we have the Civic School, which was later called Plotore (1923-1924), which was treated as a high school alongside the Normale. It was a three-year elementary school.

The city of Elbasan with their love for education, with high cultural values, created

¹⁸ Teaching the pupils of primary school was the most important, thus, the high-skilled teachers should teach them.

¹⁹ *Hylli i dritës*, korrik 1922, nr. VII, f.3.

²⁰ Teachers were tested in these subjects: writing, grammar, essay-writing, arithmetic, geography and Albanian history.

²¹ It is worth noting that the assistance of the American Red Cross and then the American Youth Red Cross for the country in general, and for Elbasan in particular, is even earlier. In the spring of 1919 in Elbasan under the direction Robert Davidson, come two American girls: Rudi (N. Ruddy) and Warren (W. Warren). Initially in this city they built a children's playground. Then they opened a girls' primary school with four classes, where 160-170 girls attended the school every day.

²² *Shkumbini*, 1921, 22 prill, nr.8, f.4

²³ *Dielli*, Boston, Mars 1913, 14 tetor, f. 4

a tradition in the history of the Albanian school and radiated it into other schools around the nation.

Conclusions

From what we have said so far, it is clear that political efforts are the necessary conditions for the effective evaluation of the school as one of the basic instruments to ensure a society not only its continuity, but also the improvement of the culture that characterizes a society. The school becomes more and more efficient through a continuous and systematic reflection on the history of the development of education and its relations with political developments. Even this paper focusing on the development of education in Elbasan, as one of the hearths of the Albanian education, is a reflection on the relationship between political and educational developments. As treated above, we can say that Elbasan, as a prosperous land with a prominent intellectual environment, created a tradition in the history of Albanian school education and radiated it on a national scale. Beyond the political-economic-social difficulties, the intellectual teachers of Elbasan managed to lay a strong foundation for the learning platforms of the future. The years from 1920 to 1924 were also crucial years, because these are the years of two education congresses (Lushnjë 1920 and Tirana 1922) where important decisions were made which aimed to build education on a state and national basis.

The period from 1920 to 1924 includes trends in school democratization. In this period there is a great effort in the sound organization of the methodical work, which was done by teachers. Despite the difficult circumstances and obstacles that emerged from time to time, education in Elbasan went on to receive even greater development. Democratic teachers worked in it, such as A. Xhuvani²⁴, K. Ciko, S. Ceka, etc. who made an important contribution to the national and democratic education of the country. The year 1924 witnessed a wide-ranging movement that culminated in the June 1924 uprising.

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²⁴ Aleksandër Xhuvani (Elbasan 14 March 1880 - Tirana 22 November 1961) was a teacher, linguist, clerk and minister of the Albanian state. For his work in the field of education he was honoured with the title "Mësuesi-Popullit" See Osmani Sh. : Fjaloripedagogjisë, 8 nëntori, Tiranë, 1983, fq. 716 - 718.