

Books and Teachers

The Great Debate on Education Kosovo needs in 2015

**Discussion Paper
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Time for a national debate

The time is ripe for a substantive national debate on the future of Kosovo schools – how to prepare the next generation of Kosovars to meet professional challenges in an uncertain future.

Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe, with half its population under the age of 26.¹ A quarter of the population is in schools at any given time. In the coming decade, these students will be leaving schools and will face a most uncertain future. If things go well, today's students will help their country catch up with the rest of Europe. If things go badly, they will be deprived of prospects, short of jobs and income, tempted to take to the streets in protest or to seek to emigrate.

Schools and education affect almost every Kosovo household. This applies to young Kosovo Albanians, but equally to Kosovo Serbs, Gorani and Roma. These young people should be Kosovo's golden generation, the first generation to grow up under conditions of both peace and democracy. It could also become Kosovo's lost generation, with its hopes crushed by the worst labor market for the young on the whole continent. All of the country's leaders, Albanian and Serb, have to answer this question: what could and what should they do now, despite limited public resources, to prepare this generation of students for the challenges of the 21st century?

Any education reform must be debated widely in order to convince not just civil servants in the capital, but thousands of teachers and school officials as well. What do teachers in different schools across the country think constitutes good education? What do they think they are preparing students for? What do students or their parents expect? The reform must make sense to school directors, teachers, students and families of students across Kosovo. It must start from where Kosovo is today.

In the classroom

Imagine you are entering a classroom in one of 989 primary and lower secondary schools in Kosovo. Let us assume this is a seventh year Albanian language class. What do you see?

There are desks lined up in three rows, two chairs per desk and a blackboard, similar to millions of other classrooms around the world. There is no other equipment in the room. Since this is the seventh grade the teacher is likely to be a man (the majority of primary school teachers covering the early years of schooling are women, whereas the subject teachers in the upper years tend to be men). He is most likely older than 45. There are between 20 and 35 students, depending on whether it is a rural or an urban school. In front of every student there are two mandatory subject textbooks: "Albanian Language 7" and the literature reader "Reading 7." Since 2008, these textbooks have been distributed to all students for free at the beginning of each school year. The teacher does not have a choice of textbooks: there is one assigned set per year.

These textbooks were first selected by textbook commissions put together by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology almost a decade ago and have been reprinted every year since then. There are no other books in the classroom. Most elementary schools do not have funds for additional learning material, for printing and copying services, or computer labs that would allow students to look for supplementary learning material online. Most children come

¹ Statistical Office of Kosovo, *Living Conditions and Living Arrangements 2011*, http://esk.rks.gov.net/rekos2011/repository/docs/living-condition_ENG.pdf.

from families that have few books at home, and live in towns or villages with limited or no access to any public libraries.

Currently the total number of students in the first nine years of schooling in Kosovo is 278,000. More than 10 per cent of the students live on social assistance. They come from families in which the majority of the parents do not have work, as less than 40 per cent of the working age population in Kosovo have a job. They might be aware that once they leave school they will face the toughest labour market in Europe. This is particularly true for the girls in the classroom.

In recent months ESI interviewed a large and diverse group of people shaping elementary education in Kosovo: ministry and municipal officials, teachers and students, textbook authors, publishers and education researchers, international donors and companies and organizations that provide technical assistance. We examined all basic laws and strategies outlining the national goal of primary education. One school director told us:

“The Ministry has so far approved so many strategies since its establishment [in 2002] but it is unclear how many of them were implemented... They have no idea how schools work and come up with these curricula and strategies.”

It is not surprising to hear teachers and directors complain about the lack of resources: overhead projectors, laboratories for basic science, support by specialists. Another school director in Pristina told us:

“We don’t have a psychologist. I am not sure what to tell teachers how to deal with difficult children. I asked the ministry for an assistant for teachers to help with these children. They sent a commission who sat in class and they concluded that no assistance was needed.”

But many teachers also point to problems with the single most important resource put into their hand by the ministry every year: textbooks.

15 years of education reform

In 2000 – during the immediate months following the end of the war—the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) embarked on an ambitious effort of “rapid educational reform.” An account of this internationally-led reform was captured in a paper produced by UNESCO:²

“Dramatic reform, even renewal, became the order of the day. Michael Daxner [Head of the UN Department of Education in Kosovo] inspired an impressive level of donor funding for education in Kosovo, obtained, in his own view and that of others, a near-free hand from the United Nations’ superiors to assert his vision on to the education system, recruited a largely hand-picked team of international educators, and assigned established international agencies core tasks within the education system.”³

This effort led to a discussion white paper called “The New Kosovo Curriculum Framework,” published in 2001. It defined objectives, assessment methods and practices, guidelines for subject curriculum development, guidelines for textbook development and more. It aimed to set the path toward an education revolution.⁴ However, public authorities in Kosovo never

² UNESCO, *Parallel Worlds: Rebuilding the education system in Kosovo*, 2004, http://www.see-educoop.net/education_in/pdf/building-kosovo-ed.pdf.

³ UNESCO 2004, p. 20.

⁴ UNESCO 2004, p. 89.

officially adopted this document. On the website of the Ministry of Education today this document can only be found in English.

While the UN-led effort to reinvent the education system was on-going, there was the practical matter of teaching 300,000 pupils in a country where many schools needed to be rebuilt and where only few textbooks existed. First, the UN had to mobilise “a body of teachers of unknown name and number.”⁵ The teachers who started to teach in late 1999 – with their strengths and weaknesses, skills and deficiencies – were largely those who had taught before.

The UN also had to coordinate donor efforts: “a plethora of NGOs and agencies flooded Kosovo in the second half of 1999. By 2000 there was then ‘such intense competition for teachers to participate in training courses and workshops in some areas that teachers could spend more time in training than in the classroom.’”⁶ In recent years this initial post-war flood of training (and donor resources) has dropped sharply.

The 2001 UNMIK curriculum framework also had no impact on one vital resource in classrooms: textbooks. Late 1999 saw a massive effort to rapidly produce and approve new books for all levels of schools. “A total of 130 titles was reviewed by a team of Kosovar educators under UNMIK supervision, and all but three subsequently published and distributed during the first semester of 1999/2000... UNMIK’s very limited capacity and reach meant that its impact on events was marginal.”⁷

In short, the UNMIK administrator left behind an innovative framework, but little had changed on the ground. Teachers were those who had taught before. The books that were printed and used were approved in a hurry. This happened without any serious review from teachers, no testing of books in pilot projects and without input from any foreign experts. The rhetoric of radical reinvention coincided with little real change in the key resources – teachers and books. Thus, by 2004 a wide gap had opened up between policies, plans and strategies developed at the central level, and what was going on in schools throughout the country.

Kosovo’s teachers today

There are today some 17,400 teachers in Kosovo, 51 per cent of whom are women. Here are two illustrative biographies of Kosovo teachers today:

A man in his 50s, educated in former Yugoslavia. He started his teaching career in the 1980s. He speaks Serbian as a second language, but no other foreign language. In the 1990s, he taught within the parallel system organised by the Kosovo Albanians after their expulsion from the official school system. He experienced repression, loss of status, economic crisis and lack of resources. War came in 1999, and like so many others, he lost someone in his extended family. After 1999 he returned to teach at a makeshift school in a tent next to the school building that was destroyed during the war.

Today he teaches in a new building, but lacks many resources and equipment. He is respected by his students and able to control them during the school hours despite widespread problems with disciplinary actions, such as grade inflation: students receiving high grades despite their level of academic performance is a reality in schools across

⁵ UNESCO 2004, p. 91-94.

⁶ UNESCO 2004, p. 96.

⁷ UNESCO 2004, p. 87.

Kosovo.⁸ He has been to a lot of trainings where he was told to not be strict and allow students to move around the classroom freely. By now he has become sceptical of foreign trainers and new initiatives from the ministry.

A woman in her late 20s. She was a teenager at the time of the war and had herself attended the parallel school system. After the war, she applied to the Faculty of Education to study to become a teacher. She was motivated by job security—“it is a job with short hours and secure contract” – and by a calling to teach the younger generation. She is unhappy about the declining respect for her profession. Some people told her: “only those students who could not get enrolled at other faculties apply to study education.” Studying at the new Education Faculty (operational since 2003) was not easy, as it was undergoing constant reorganisation. She speaks and understands some English, though not well. She entered the classroom for the first time as a trainee teacher. Today she teaches a primary school class.

She finds the syllabus overloaded: “I keep having to develop lessons for forty minute increments, for topics when I could easily use three hours.” She has attended some teacher training and has found the most concrete advice most useful: “I now always use the traffic light method. I explain something and ask the kids to grade it with a green light, which means they understood it well, yellow light, which means they understood it partially and red light, which means I have to explain everything again.” And yet, she often struggles with maintaining discipline in the classroom. There is little the school can do to help her with disruptive students. If she is strict she risks a confrontation with the student’s parents. She is frustrated by the erosion of respect for the authority of teachers among many parents and students. Despite this she tries to make her classes interesting for students with very limited resources: “If I had a projector, laptop and a standard western classroom, I could have many more activities in our classroom, but we need to improvise most of the time.” She is unhappy with the current textbooks.

Today’s teachers are also going to be tomorrow’s teachers. The key challenge is to help them, in particular those who are young enough to still be teaching in ten years, to become better at their job. And this particularly involves focusing on the key resource the state gives them for their daily work in the classroom: textbooks.

Textbooks matter

Some ministry officials suggest that it may be time for Kosovo teachers to “go beyond” textbooks. “Textbooks are just one of the many sources they should use. They should become more creative and find other sources of teaching material. For example they should look online,” a Ministry of Education official told ESI. Such thinking helps to explain why, of all important aspects of education, Kosovo textbooks remain the least studied. They are also, unsurprisingly, the aspect of education least addressed by foreign assistance, as books exist only in Albanian and have not been translated. There is in fact an urgent need for a serious in-depth review of books, which are crucial for the future of Kosovo education.

Textbooks are free for students and teachers. Little else is. There is a very limited supply of other teaching material. One only needs to visit a number of school libraries to see the problem. In a typical Pristina school a library is located in a small room on the second floor. It has four shelves that run along three walls and are half empty. The books on the shelves are copies of some 100 books that have been used in Albanian language classes for decades. Some of these books are damaged and old; a few recent donations are from publishing houses or NGOs. In a

⁸ In the municipality of Pristina the average for all students in elementary school is 4.45 from a maximum of 5.

school library in Gjilan we were told: “We only have titles from the communist era.” Publishing houses from Albania have published some new literature, and translated a few books from Spanish and English (for younger children) for sale in bookstores in urban areas. But the prices of books are high for an average Kosovar family, particularly for families living in rural areas. In all classrooms we visited the free textbooks were essential to give a structure to the whole pedagogical process. In families without books at home, books in the classroom are most often the only books available to children.

In 2005 the Institute of Education of the University of London undertook a review of the UNMIK Kosovo Curriculum Framework (2001). It also offered recommendations on future textbooks:

“In the new generation of textbooks being planned, the review teams are sure attention will be paid to aspects of ‘user-friendliness’ and attracting and holding the students’ interest... the textbook that addresses and captivates the teacher as much as the student (that captivates the pupils because it has first captivated the teacher).”⁹

The review noted this could be achieved:

“by involving teachers quite intimately, and even more than previously, in the production of the new textbooks, as members of writing teams, in consultant focus groups at draft stage, and in piloting the textbooks.”¹⁰

In fact, none of this has ever happened in Kosovo. The process of book production was a hasty endeavour – three months between the production of syllabi and printing of the books – and without serious input from teachers or testing with students.

In 2011 the ministry passed a set of standards for textbooks. These standards were developed with the help of an organization called International Projects in Education (IPE), part of the Teacher Training College in Zurich. The document noted that “many of the current textbooks are out-of-date and do not meet the needs of or correctly portray the circumstances of the young democratic Republic of Kosovo.” The document set out guidelines to review textbooks. These cover everything from their structure to their scientific relevance to age appropriateness and their pedagogical value. The guidelines recommend testing new books with students in classrooms before they are allowed on the market.

However, such principles were not applied to the textbooks in Kosovo. Not in 1999, when 130 textbooks were approved in a rush. Not in 2003-2007, when over 90 textbooks were approved. Since then none of the books in use have been systematically reviewed. There is much anecdotal evidence that there are discrepancies between current books and professed objectives of Kosovo education.

Inaccuracy and turgid texts

In 2010 the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) – a regional media organization - published a study analysing 16 textbooks that covered biology, geography, history and civic education for grades six to nine. The report identified an overload of information, unexplained information and turgid texts (such as 20 facts expressed within four lines). Books failed to

⁹ Institute of Education, University of London, *The National Curriculum of Kosova – the review of its first steps*, 2005, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

encourage critical thinking and to meet basic gender and democratic standards.¹¹ There were also many inaccuracies and inconsistencies. In 2013 BIRN returned to the issue to see whether publishers had addressed any of the mistakes that the initial study had found; in most cases this has not been done.¹²

Gender bias

In 2007 the Kosovo Education Centre (KEC) – a non-governmental organization focusing on education research – looked at the representation of men and women in Albanian language textbooks. It examined seven newly drafted text books and concluded that the content contained very strong gender bias:

Out of 14 authors of the seven books, 12 are men. Out of a total of 323 analyzed texts, 72 percent are written by men and seven percent by women (the rest have no author listed). Of 128 illustrations, 120 depict male characters and only eight women. In 323 of the teaching lessons in the study, only 45 mention women in professional roles (this includes being a housewife) compared to 187 mentioning men.¹³

Substandard didactic material

In 2013 the Pedagogical Institute of Kosovo analysed teaching materials in Albanian literature readers for primary and lower secondary schools. In an 80-page study it argued that “didactic material in some textbooks is not chosen well and not always does it allow students to work independently, think critically, debate, experiment and apply their knowledge in practice.”¹⁴

Such research is confirmed by statements from a large number of teachers during our research for this project:

“The books are really dry. I have to find my own sources most of the time. It’s disturbing. The 7th grade textbook is so dry and the grammar is just too heavy for 7th graders.”

Albanian Language Teacher, Pristina

“I have to improvise all the time, since the textbooks are terrible and we have no infrastructure to use the new teaching techniques. Let me tell you this: the books are terrible. I cannot use them with the new reform. The reforms are new and the textbooks are still the same... The ABC book has a lot of material but the syllabus does not have enough hours... The workbook is pretty good. The math books are terrible...”

Grade One Teacher, Gjilan

“X (a publishing house), for example, has some interest from an author, even if he is not the best one. They select him to write the textbooks. They then bribe the reviewers; tell them the code number given to the author and they approve these books without any analysis. I cannot count how many mistakes they have. Now teachers have to read and scratch lots of stuff off textbooks and examine them for mistakes. We have actually made it a practice; to read the textbooks and scratch stuff off before teaching the lesson.”

Principal, Pristina

¹¹ BIRN, “Problemet dhe te metat e teksteve shkollore”, 2010.

¹² BIRN, “Problemet dhe te metat e teksteve shkollore”, 2010, and “Rishqyrtim i ceshtjeve te ngritura ne studimin e vitit”, 2013.

¹³ Kosovo Education Center (KEC), *Gender Equality in Albanian Literature (Reading) textbooks for primary and lower secondary education in Kosovo*, 2007.

¹⁴ IPK, *Didactic Material in Textbooks*, 2013.

“Books need revising. Sometimes the same example is used in many different books – kids then learn those sentences by heart and then they only know those examples. The kind of grammar we teach them is actually not necessarily useful to them. It is grammar for people who study Albanian language and literature in University. It is too heavy.”

Albanian Language Teacher, Pristina

“These children need simpler texts. Or simpler questions. The questions are like for older kids. I like the Reading book – these texts are more understandable and graspable for students in grade 3.”

Grade Three Teacher, Pristina

How (not) to inspire love of reading

ESI also began to examine specific books. One example is the Albanian reader for the 3rd year students (8 year olds), which has 177 pages. Most texts in the book are archaic or folkloristic and many promote misogyny, racism, male heroism and self-victimization. Take the folk tale *I love my wife like sugar and my mother like salt*. It is a story about a son who sits at dinner with his mother and his young bride. He tells his bride that he loves her like sugar and his mother that he loves her like salt. Then he goes to bed while the women clean. When his bride joins him she tells him that his mother is sad, saying: “I spent my youth on him and he says I am like salt.” The son then tells his mother to prepare dinner without salt for his friends. They dislike the dinner. In this way he proves to his mother that salt is essential. “Sugar,” he explains, “I can live without for a year.”

Or take the story *Mother’s Rare Flowers* about a mother and her son. He leaves to go abroad. His mother gives him some seeds and says, “make your home where these seeds produce flowers.” He tries in many places. Finally, he returns home. Only there the flowers bloom. His mother is happy and shows him the clothes she prepared for his bride. The book then contained the following explanation for students.

“Because of bad conditions, Albanians were forced to go abroad many times, and to turn their back on their homeland. In this story we have a description of the bad fate of a migrant. This is evidence that nobody finds peace anywhere but in their homeland. Even flower seeds do not grow.”

In literature classes there is the option for teachers to also assign other reading. But in fact few books are actually available. One book that is assigned to grade 5 students is called “Yellow valleys” It is the story of a couple with seven daughters who keep trying to have children in the hope to get a son. As the daughters grow up they are shown as very sad for not having a brother. “Who will inherit the house?” they ask, crying and working the land. Most boys and girls in Kosovo have not only read this story in school, but also had to write an analysis on the lessons from this story.

All of this points to an important conclusion: in an environment as starved of good and easily available children’s literature as today’s Kosovo, books in school (both textbooks and additional reading) are key if children are to acquire good reading skills and a lifelong taste for reading. Currently there are no plans to review existing books. Neither are there any programs to translate and stock school libraries with good children’s literature. Nor is there a systematic study whether the current literature that students read in school increases their life-long interest in reading.

The case for a broad debate

So what is needed in 2015? Given that a majority of primary and lower secondary school teachers do not read foreign languages proficiently, it might be useful to translate some good foreign textbooks for inspiration and to enrich the debate. It might also be useful to translate some currently used Kosovo books to allow feedback from outside experts. One should also strengthen the capacities of the Pedagogical Institute to work on textbook quality and to integrate the comparative analysis of (existing) textbooks into the curriculum of the Faculties for Education for future teachers. Kosovo needs a broad debate – involving as many teachers as possible – on education. A part of this debate must focus on what the next generation of textbooks should look like. This would require prioritising efforts to improve textbooks, and a better process for selecting textbooks, with credible methodologies including focus groups, international comparisons, feedback from teachers in the fields, piloting new books in schools.

Textbooks matter, especially in a poor country like Kosovo. In 2010, a McKinsey report looked at education systems around the world. It identified twenty improving systems around the world and the interventions made in order to improve. It identified providing teachers with quality textbooks and user guides as the key intervention for progress in countries with weak education systems:

“This requires ensuring that lower-skill teachers are given the support of high-quality teaching materials and lesson plans that can closely guide what they do on a daily basis. As one Asian system leader says... ‘We did everything we could to make it as easy as possible for our teachers to teach.’”¹⁵

Let us hope that in 2015 this basic lesson will also be applied to Kosovo: and that every effort will be made to help teachers in their classrooms in their crucial work.

¹⁵ McKinsey&Company, *How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, 2010, p. 44, http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/How-the-Worlds-Most-Improved-School-Systems-Keep-Getting-Better_Download-version_Final.pdf.

Basic reading on Kosovo education

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