EDUCATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: WHAT DO WE TEACH OUR CHILDREN?

The Analysis of the 'National Group of Subjects' Contents in Textbooks

SUMMARY

Education, especially the education on the primary and secondary schools level, represents one of the most important features in shaping a future valid member of the socio-political community. In this respect, education possesses one of the most important exponents of continuities as well as of intergenerational exchanges of the basic principles and society values, but it should also be a promoter of the indispensable reassessments and adjustments of those principles and values to the new circumstances. At the same time, education should not be regarded exclusively in the role it plays for the society development, but also as a field for each student's full development in accordance with her/his abilities.

In societies which are struggling with disunity and intergroup tensions followed by, or even caused by the groups' homogenization, education represents a very powerful source of both cohesive and disintegrative powers. In that sense we can speak about constructive and destructive dimensions of the education system. Destructive dimension in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as in a society characterized by the very lack of socio-political unity, i.e. as in society dominated by disintegrative powers in the area of education; it would generate a continuous bigotry, intolerance and disrespect of human rights, thus making impossible the restoration of B&H society as a multicultural and multiethnic society and as a truly pluralistic community. At the same time, it would be more difficult for the student, as an essential education user, to develop her/his own open and critical attitude towards the world.

Having in mind the crucial importance of education for B&H as a society and the state, the B&H Open Society Fund launched the Project called "*Education in B&H: What do We Teach Our Students?"* It is drafted from the following components: The Parents and Students' Attitude Research, and The Analysis of the 'National Group of Subjects' Contents in Textbooks.

The Analysis of the 'National Group of Subjects' Contents in Textbooks

The basic question that this Analysis needed to answer was whether textbooks, and to what extent, promote social cohesion and stimulate positive attitude towards students' own country. Social cohesion and positive attitude development towards one's own country in textbooks poses a requirement by the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Schools

on the B&H level, and it represents one of the basic documents used in formulating the starting point of this Analysis. The rest of documents include The Pledges of the Education Reform Framework, The Education Principles of the Open Society and The Guidelines for Designing and Writing the History and Geography Textbooks.

All the above-mentioned documents suggest that the education system is such, that it should support democratic development of Bosnia and Herzegovina; an education system promoting the respect of ethnic and cultural differences as a precondition for survival and development of the whole society.

The Goals:

- Verify to which extent textbooks and curriculum within the three education systems in B&H are in accordance with legislation and the relevant documents on the Education System Reform.
- Get an idea of the education system influence it has on the social cohesion process and on creating a positive attitude towards own country, as well as on promoting respect of diversities and on appreciating its importance.
- Create favourable preconditions for the public debate on the Curricula Reform and on textbooks' contents, as well as for the modifications of contents in accordance with legislation and documents which had been adopted during the Education Reform process.
- Provide the basis and the platform for the reform of the education policy as a conceptual and practical framework of the Curricula Reform.

The Research Subject: The research, which was conducted together by the B&H Open Society Fund and ProMENTE - Social Research Agency, encompassed 145 textbooks, which are being used for teaching national group of subjects (mother language and literature, geography and history) and religious education from 5 – 9 grade of primary schools, as well as in all secondary schools' grades in all Bosnia and Herzegovina. All the textbooks which were used in the academic 2005/06 year were approved by Ministries for Education, Science and Culture of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of Republic of Srpska.

Methodology and Research Criteria

The analysis included the contents of textbooks, which was its primary goal, as well as their general characteristics such as the format, typesetting, compliance with pedagogical norms and

principles, encouragement of critical thinking development with students. The analysis criteria have been formulated on the basis of the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Schools on the B&H level as well as on the Pledges of the Education Reform:

- Raise awareness of the affiliation to the state of B&H;
- Learning about own cultural identity, language and tradition in line with civilization achievements, and learning about the others in terms of respecting diversities and cultivating mutual understanding as well as solidarity among all nations, ethnic groups and communities living within Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- Promoting respect of human rights and basic freedoms, and educating each person to live in democracy based society and a rule of law society by developing critical thinking from the earliest age.

European Convention on Regional or Minority Languages and the UN Convention on Children's Rights (both of them are integral parts of the B&H Constitution) along with the above-mentioned laws have been used. Education principles of an open society have also been constituent elements: education as the public welfare, inteculturalism, social justice and respect of human rights.

Beneficiaries of the Research should, above all, be Education Ministries on all levels, as creators of education policy that should be adjusted with the aforementioned laws and other relevant documents, as well as Pedagogical Institutes that supervise and do assessments of the schools' work performance. This research is also aimed for parents and students as the most important education beneficiaries, as well as for publishers, authors of textbooks, NGOs and for civic society as an important subject of development of a democratic community that is based upon universal human rights.

The Main Conclusions

- Although the contents in all textbooks seem to serve as positive samples of teaching students on their belongingness to the country of B&H and to mutual historical heritage of all its nations; yet, there is a major impression that textbooks on national group of subjects and on religious education, are predominantly dealing with only one nation and that they are not in favour of multicultural society. This encourages segregation of students as well as of society as a whole, and it directly violates the legislations and the

platform for the Education Reform as well as those principles of the International Conventions that are relevant in the sphere of education.

- The mere concept of textbooks does not endorse either individual approach that is necessary for special groups of students' inclusion into the official education system, or equal representation of minority groups, which makes their social inclusion harder.
- Textbooks do not stimulate critical thinking development but they do support all dominant prejudices and stereotypes.
- In spite of the fact that there are differences among textbooks, they generally do not meet the optimal level in accordance to the most important characteristics for acquiring knowledge and for motivating students.

Findings in Different Subjects

Mother language and literature: The name itself of identical language that is being studied is stimulating linguistic segregation; textbooks are both nationally and ideologically directed to promoting and treating the culture of only one nation. At the same time it is being forgotten that one of the most significant features of B&H is its cultural diversity and hence insisting on exclusive national consciousness as of the earliest age. There is also another characteristic tendency in these textbooks and that is so-called arrogation of authors and their works by a certain nation, and in doing that they are misusing biography facts in order to pronounce a certain author solely as Serb, Croat or Bosniak depending on where the textbook is being utilized. The way in which contents are being represented does not contribute to students' critical thinking development, but on the contrary, it supports and reproduces the most significant prejudices and stereotypes.

History: The number of positive models in teaching history is very limited; the largest number of models deals with equal presence and diversity as richness. However, negative samples are dominating in respect to belonging to B&H as a country, and textbooks are not cherishing the feeling of a common B&H historical heritage. At the same time students' critical thinking is not being developed and the explanations of the historical-political processes are burdened by political interpretations which greatly support effective auto and hetero-stereotypes. Not too often, yet there are samples of violation of the Human Rights Convention, especially in terms of

using abusive language, which tells about poor author's sensibility in reference to respect of different groups.

Geography: Cherishing the belongingness to B&H as a country and the corresponding validation of its cultural diversity is not a frequent occurrence, although there are areas of equal representations of different B&H regions in textbooks. On the contrary, we can say that prevailing are the negative samples, which are adverse to the basic legislations and to the spirit of the announced Reform. Besides, only few samples could be found, which might contribute to students' critical thinking development.

Religious education: It is important to emphasize that religious institutions are exclusively in charge of organizing and teaching this subject, not education institutions. The textbooks themselves, to certain extent, present those positive values on which the Framework Law provisions insist upon. However, there is a significant number of examples that are in collision with those principles starting with glorifying the own religion. Religious diversity is being treated as a problem, while belonging to one's own religion is being treated very exclusively, which stimulates the feeling of being endangered among students. Political messages are implicit, and critical thinking is not being stimulated. The way they are portraying "infidels" from their own ranks as less valued individuals is especially problematic.

General Characteristics of Textbooks: Majority of the analyzed textbooks are characterized by the old teaching approach based on uncritical contents' learning and on numerous facts reproduction. Students are not motivated for learning and teaching methods do not stimulate curiosity or research work.

Recommendations:

Education Ministries along with government commissions for textbooks' approval should revised contents of national group of subjects for the purpose of avoiding national segregation. Legislations, Open Society's Principles and criteria from those textbooks that stimulate critical thinking should be the guidelines of the revision. The final goal should be creation of common basis for national group of subjects, which should not include posing one simplified and falsely unique image of the world, but it should present controversial attitudes, the respect of different perspectives and getting students to be used to different interpretations of processes and developments, which could help to outgrow social divisions.

Pedagogical Institutes should actively take part in textbooks' production as well as in helping teachers in establishing legally based on teaching principles in education system.

Publishers and Authors of Textbooks, in the course of the process of producing textbooks, must bear in mind knowledge purposeful as well as laying the groundwork for students to utilize that knowledge in their private, social and professional lives. Therefore, multidisciplinary teams with teachers in them should be engaged in that process and they should use the existing guidelines for producing textbooks, and at the same time they should not fail to forget education function of the textbook. The most important concern is to introduce into textbooks teachings about other nations and minorities who also live in B&H, as well as such contents that would stimulate positive attitudes towards those other nations and students with special needs, too. Students, as primary education users in an effort to have more interesting and more effective textbooks, should have an active role in textbooks' production.

Teachers need to build up with their students the consciousness of social importance of the subject they teach by instructing them about the broader context of education contents and by demonstrating the existence of the tight connection between the knowledge they acquire at schools and the socio-political reality.