



Primary and secondary education in Bosnia and Herzegovina

(current state and recommendations for reforms)

Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is at a stand still – twenty years after the war, teaching methods in primary and secondary schools have not evolved. Teaching staff continues to teach, students write down and afterwards reproduce through written or oral exams. Grades that students carry from one education level into another are the only indicator of their performance, and students are graded exclusively by the teacher that teaches a particular subject.

Although primary education lasts nine years now, instead of eight years, reforms neither have been implemented thoroughly, nor has the change of systems been done simultaneously and identically. In 2004 in the Republic of Srpska, nine-year primary education had been introduced in such a way that students enrolled in a higher grade than it was required, for instance, a pupil was enrolled in the fourth grade of the nine-year primary school, instead of the third grade of the eight-year primary school. In some cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina first generation of the nine-year primary school was enrolled in 2004 as well as the last generation of the eight-year primary school, thus in 2012 the eight-year primary school became a matter of the past. In other cantons first generations of the nine-year primary school were enrolled somewhat later, thus in schools that conduct class according to the Croatian-language curriculum there are still children that attend the eight-year primary school.

Three curricula

Education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is identical in terms of methodology and structure of the curricula – each of the three curricula¹ determines content which teachers²

¹There are three curricula in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the Curriculum for primary schools in the Republic of Srpska, the Framework Curriculum for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Croatian-language curriculum.



teach to children, but they disregard the fact that teachers should provide guidance for their students in order to achieve certain objectives at the end of the primary or secondary school. Having this in mind, we can say that there is only one education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, if we consider the content of the curricula (specifically the national group of subjects³), then we have three different education systems. Three different curricula are the result of the assigned jurisdictions within the education system – in the Republic of Srpska education is placed at the entity level and managed by the corresponding ministry through the Pedagogical institute of the Republic of Srpska. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina the jurisdiction is delegated to the cantons. However, the Education Institute in Mostar is in charge of all schools that follow the Croatian-language curriculum, whereas the cantons comprised of Bosniak majority use the Framework Curriculum for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina which is adapted, changed and amended. Thorough analysis of the Framework Curriculum for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (version which is applied in the canton Sarajevo) was conducted by the Commission of the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Sarajevo Canton. The document of the analysis⁴ was published in 2011. The most significant conclusions of the analysis are as follows: the curriculum essentially retained all the elements of the traditional programme and the eight-year primary school; the curriculum as a unique document doesn't exist – it is rather a collection of syllabi; the topics are repeated and overlapped within the same or more subjects throughout several grades or the entire education cycle; the language of the curriculum is administrative, formal and confusing; the concept of the curriculum does not encourage problem tasks solving or profound examination of the topics. It is characterized by

² Masculine nouns will be used throughout the text for labelling professions, and the term refers to both genders respectively.

³In the education system of Bosnia and Herzegovina mother tongue, literature, history and geography are considered to be the main subjects which shape and preserve national culture and tradition. Along with these subjects, national culture is in the focus of religious instruction as well.

⁴The document is available on the following link:

www.skolegijum.ba/static/biblioteka/5460fcc35ceb5_02AnalizaNPPzadevetogodisnjeobrazovanjeuKantonuSarajevo.pdf



extensiveness and superficial approach to subject matters requiring that children shift from one topic onto another without deeper analysis...

The cantonal pedagogical institutions have the jurisdiction over the realization of the content of the Framework Curriculum. All the cantons⁵ where class is conducted in accordance with the Framework Curriculum of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina have pedagogical institutions, except for the Central Bosnia canton.

Strategic guidelines have not been accomplished

Nonetheless, we can formally speak about a common education policy at the state-level, even though, in practice, it is hard to find results of the common education policy over the entire territory of the Dayton state. Furthermore, in the midst of 2008 the Council of Ministers adopted the Strategic Guidelines for the Development of Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Implementation Plan for 2008-2015 (further in the text Strategic Guidelines). Thus, the 2015 came, but much what had been recorded as the current state in education for 2007, did not change eight years later, despite having created the aforementioned document as an attempt to change the current state.

The document confirmed that the jurisdiction over education in Bosnia and Herzegovina is decentralized. Such jurisdiction allows every level of government to enact their own laws on education, determine curricula and textbook policy, plan and execute budgets (simultaneously determining the amount and (ir)regularity of teacher wages). The result of such disunion is uneven education policies, emphasis on the national group of subjects and lack of any valid external evaluation of students' achievements after finishing primary and secondary school.

Thus, in 2008 the government made a promise that by 2015 education would be (among other things) *more open, flexible, and it would allow individuals to exercise their own learning*

⁵ Una-Sana canton, Zenica-Doboj canton, Tuzla canton, Sarajevo canton, Bosna-Podrinje canton, Herzegovina-Neretva canton.



methods and approaches which are adjusted to their potentials, needs and interests. The document affirmed that by this year (2015) we would have a system of evaluation and measurement of employee performance, which would simultaneously serve as a foundation for the professional advancement of each and every teacher. A renewable licence for teaching profession would be introduced. According to the document the main condition for the licence renewal, apart from the success in the ongoing work, would be the participation of individuals in the system of professional improvement and advancement.

Learning contents would be disburdened of irrelevant facts and would be more in line with life and development of science and technology; application of methods focused on a child/student and development of critical thinking would be encouraged, so that students, after finishing primary and secondary education, would be able to solve problems and apply their knowledge. Already this school year we should bear witness to the developed programmes that are goal-oriented, and even more oriented on learning results, and programmes for targeted groups (for early education, ethnic minority members, persons with disabilities, the gifted, prequalification etc.). Not only would the students be evaluated, but they would also evaluate their teachers because, it has been revealed, that a system of internal evaluation, including self-evaluation, integral and external evaluations would be implemented in order to improve efficiency of the education process and complete monitoring of the work of the educational institutions and teachers. External evaluation, which would be conducted by standardized procedures at the end of sixth and ninth grades of primary school and the final grade of secondary school, had also been announced; thus, the students' achievement standards for primary and secondary education would be determined.

All of the aforementioned was valid for the whole territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless which curriculum was being applied. The entire process should have been monitored by the Conference of Ministers of Education (all ministers of education⁶), and the Agency for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (APOSO) at the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina should have managed and coordinated the announced

⁶ The Conference of Ministers of Education is comprised of two entity ministers, ten cantonal ministers and the representative of the Department of Education of Brčko District.



education reforms. The conference of ministers was held infrequently so that most of the announced reforms had actually never begun.

Achievement standards

Only achievement standards, of all of the above, are well under way, but far from being completed. In other words, APOSO has been designing students' achievement standards for the past several years. So far, only achievement assessments for Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian language and literature, and foreign languages have been published⁷. Finalization of students' achievements for other subjects is under way. The work on this aspect is still not completed although it has been asserted in the Strategic Guidelines. The official title of the document is confusing – the *Common core curricula for Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian language and literature based on the learning outcomes*, since the document only contains outcomes, but not curriculum. The term „common core“ is a remnant from the eight-years primary education system when education policies agreed upon the minimal common contents from the national group of subjects that should be included in all three curricula. The title is confusing because the term common core is used to refer to students's achievements, and the document does not contain a proposed content that would help achieve learning outcomes in class. It is important to notice that, prior to having published the outcomes for Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian language and literature, competent educational institutions in the Zenica-Doboj canton and the canton Sarajevo have adopted the document and initiated the process of modification of the valid curriculum for Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian language and literature. Both processes are in their initial stages.

⁷Both documents are available on the APOSO official website (www.aposo.gov.ba/o-agenciji/organizacijska-struktura/publikacije/)



Textbooks

Apart from the content-oriented curricula, education in Bosnia and Herzegovina has another pressing issue – textbooks. Needless to say, textbook policy is also disparate – in the Republic of Srpska textbooks are published by the Institute for Textbook Publishing and Teaching Aids and there is only one textbook for one subject for the whole territory of the Republic of Srpska. Liberation policy has been announced as well as the prospect of issuing an invitation to tenders for textbook authorization, however, the publishing monopoly is still in the hands of the state publisher. In schools where class is held in Croatian language, teachers may choose textbooks between two given publishers. Those textbooks are mostly designed for the needs of primary schools in Croatia, but the publication for Bosnia and Herzegovina is adapted in accordance with the valid curriculum.

The most complicated situation is with the textbooks that are used in schools where class is conducted in accordance with the Framework Curriculum for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Federal Ministry of Education and Science⁸, on behalf of the cantonal ministries of education that compose the Conference of Ministers of Education⁹, issues an invitation to tenders for the selection of textbooks. Publishers apply for the tender with encoded manuscripts. The publishers also pay a five-member team of consulting editors for textbooks which, in accordance with a recommended form that is the same for all textbooks for all subjects, evaluate submitted manuscripts, rank them and, in accordance with the valid policy, authorize a number of textbooks that will be used in class for a particular subject. During the tenure of the Federal Minister of Education and Science Meliha Alić, two models

⁸The Constitutional Court of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2010 contested a part of the jurisdiction of the relevant Ministry of Education and Science; although the jurisdiction is significantly decreased and the amount of work reduced to a minimum, the Ministry still exists in the newly constituted Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁹The coordination of ministers of education of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is comprised of 6 cantonal ministers from the cantons where class is conducted in accordance with the Framework Curriculum of FB&H and the federal minister of education. The coordination is in charge of the curriculum and textbooks authorization. However, the decisions made by the Coordination are not binding for any of the cantonal ministries.



have been used – until 2008 out of all edited textbooks for authorization, three textbooks with the highest score were selected. For the next two years all edited textbooks that scored 85% or more points were authorized to be used in class. Because of that decision, for the time being, ten history textbooks were authorized for the seventh grade. After Damir Mašić had become the Federal Minister of Education and Science in 2011, all the earlier selection mechanisms (encoded manuscripts, five-member consulting editor team, the same editor form) were retained, however, only one textbook was authorized for schools. The biggest problem with this policy of textbook selection is the lack of transparency and the lack of responsibility on the part of editors for the omissions made while evaluating the submitted manuscripts. The damaged publishers may file an appeal, but the appeal is dismissed even when it is quite clear that a mistake has been made in the selection. Detailed information about the textbook selection process can be found in the case study publication *Svezame, otvori se*¹⁰ in which the authors of the reader *Svezame, otvori se* described a five-year struggle with the editors and educational institutions, and made an exhaustive account of all the defects and shortcomings of this particular selection policy, mistakes and omissions of the editors, and also the absurdity of the designed textbook policy. Thorough analysis of textbooks for the nine-year primary school has not been done. The last analysis was done in 2007 and it dealt with textbooks for the national group of subjects and religious instruction for the eight-year primary and secondary school¹¹.

Discrimination in the education system

Decentralisation of the education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is best illustrated with the failure of the Federal Ministry of Education and Science to solve the problem known as „two schools under one roof“ in the last term. Although the Supreme Court of the Federation

¹⁰ http://www.skolegijum.ba/static/biblioteka/5460fceb0f5f5_05Svezameotvorise.studijaslucaja.pdf

¹¹ www.skolegijum.ba/static/biblioteka/5460fcb3b03a6_01Anallizasadrzajaudzbenikanacionalnegrupepredmeta.pdf



of Bosnia and Herzegovina ruled that the long-standing practice of separating educational institution based on ethnicity is an instance of ethnic segregation of students and an obvious example of discrimination, the practice is still present. Policies whose prime aim is to make discrimination a part of the education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina supersede court rulings.

Education funding

Even though teaching staff teach children of different ethnic backgrounds and follow different curricula, they have one struggle in common – wages. A balanced system of wages for education workers does not exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina – not only that wages are unequal, but the payroll is also different. For instance, in the canton Herzegovina-Neretva in schools where class is conducted in accordance with the Framework Curriculum of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the work position is being paid regardless of what qualifications an employee has.

Thus, someone who has a two-year degree or a university degree has the same wage. In Sarajevo canton the degree of education is being paid, therefore, in primary schools there is a difference in wages for teachers with a two-year degree and those with a university degree. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina teachers receive meal allowance, whereas in the Republic of Srpska such allowance does not exist. In certain parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to meager funds in budgets, wages are being late for several months. This is the case with the canton Una-Sana.

Nonetheless, wages for the employees in the education system (despite their amount and (ir)regularity) continue to be practically the only item in the budgets of competent ministries. According to the Strategy Guidelines *out of the total allocated funds for education about 88% goes for gross wages and compensations, about 8% goes for material costs, and about 4% goes for capital investments.* The only difference in comparison to the situation from 7 years ago is that capital investments for primary and secondary schools are not financed from



the budget. Non-governmental and international organizations are the only ones that finance and reward schools that are trying to mend the existing education system. For instance, the Open Society Fund project, based on the invitation for tenders and the evaluation of the submitted applications, allots a little less than 20.000 KM for ten most successful school activities. USAID also invests in the change of the education practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, through the Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step, several million of KM had been invested for the education of teachers and for furnishing 18 primary schools across Bosnia and Herzegovina. UNICEF had financed the creation of the already mentioned students' achievements for Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian language and literature. The Ministries are most frequent in paying wages, but not so frequent in paying suppliers, school maintenance bills, and supply of necessary materials, which all further complicates classroom activities. The situation that had been recorded in 2008 and indicated in the Strategy still remains unchanged: *the Republic of Srpska spends 4% of GDP for education, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina spends about 6%, whereas the Department of Education of the Government of Brčko District (with all its subdepartments for preschool and primary education, secondary education and common affairs) takes up 11,2% of the Brčko District budget. In most cantons allocated funds for education account for the biggest part of the cantonal budgets. Although percentage allocations in budgets intended for education are relatively high, those funds are still insufficient and meager having in mind that the overall budgets of entities, cantons and Brčko District are low and limited.*

External evaluation of knowledge

Still, the given numbers themselves mean very little. The question than nobody in Bosnia and Herzegovina can give an accurate answer to is how much quality education do the citizens get for their money. The only international external study in which primary school students from



Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the TIMSS¹² assessment in 2007. This study showed that primary school students from Bosnia and Herzegovina are not at the level of their peers from other parts of the world, and that they had the lowest score when it came to solving given problems, and not reproducing acquired knowledge. Unfortunately, this particular assessment was not taken as the starting point for changing the methods of teaching math and science in primary education. Lejla Draganić¹³ had written about the thorough analysis of the TIMSS assessment results and, as an example, gave questions that students did not even try to answer. *One such example is a math question that measures reasoning skills: Vanja knows that one pen costs 1KM more than a pencil. His friend has bought 2 pens and 3 pencils for 17KM. How much money will Vanja need to buy one pen and 2 pencils? There were 7,5% correct answers, whereas 62,5 % didn't answer the question.*

In the past two years in Sarajevo Canton, final grade primary school students had taken external final exam (*matura*). External final exam consists of 5 exams – three obligatory (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language and literature, Math and English language) and two elective subjects (one elective subject is selected among History, Geography and Computer science, and the other among Biology, Physics and Chemistry). Student exams are encoded, so that teachers do not know the names of students when grading the exams. The external final exam is scheduled at the same time for all schools, and teachers from other schools monitor examinations and afterwards grade the exams. The results that students achieve at the external final exams are an obligatory part of the documents and make up 30% of points required for the secondary school admission. Although the complicated process of external evaluation was solidly conducted, and had a few serious omissions (for instance, history teacher from „Malta“ Primary School creates the final test for all students, and the students from his school have the best performance on the test, and nobody from the relevant commissions finds this practice problematic), the content of the exams only examines what

¹² Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies is an assessment which measures and compares students' achievements in mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry and geography at the international level every four years.

¹³ http://www.skolegijum.ba/static/biblioteka/5460dfd554a6_03KvalitetitroskoviobrazovanjauBiH.pdf



students have memorised from the curricula without examining higher-order of thinking such as analysing, evaluating, creating...

Secondary school

Most data and examples that have been given in the forgoing part of the text refer to primary schools. The secondary school system in Bosnia and Herzegovina changes at the slowest pace (reforms in primary schools and higher education institutions are evident despite being insufficient) and there are insignificant efforts that would call for the change of the curricula in secondary schools, for the teachers to change their teaching methods and for the young people to decide, already at this stage of education, on their professions for the later stage. Secondary school is not compulsory (in the canton Sarajevo compulsory secondary education lasts only two years, which may be one of the reasons why it is not in the prime focus). Gymnasiums, Secondary medical schools and Secondary schools for economics can select primary school graduates with best grades, while other secondary schools cannot use any kind of enrolment criteria since the number of enrolled students is already small. It should be emphasized that there are also secondary schools that follow international education standards (the United World College in Mostar, IB programme in the Second Sarajevo Gymnasium and Cambridge programme in the First Bosniak Gymnasium also in Sarajevo), and these are attended by students whose parents can pay year tuition. Thus, these schools are not attainable for all primary school students who would like to enrol in. It should be underlined that there is no collaboration between primary and secondary schools, and except for the grades that students bring to the secondary school, teachers show no interest in any other level of student's performance in the primary school.



What actions should be undertaken to improve primary and secondary education in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

First step would require an agreement regarding fundamental goals – what is it that we want our children to learn and know, and what skills should they obtain after completing certain level of education. Following this framework, the students' achievement standards that had already been made by APOSO should be used, or the new achievement standards should be made and used to change the existing curricula; imposing mandatory subject matters should be avoided, a list of possible subject matters that would help achieve necessary outcomes should be created, and teachers should be given more freedom and responsibility to create their classes on their own.

In addition to that, it is crucial to further educate teachers that work in schools and oblige them to attend a specifically determined number of hours of education seminars within one school year. Simultaneously, the curricula of teaching faculties should be changed and adapted to suit a different primary and secondary school where students and future professors at higher education institution would acquire knowledge and skills necessary for the work in classroom.

It is important to inspect how much did the change of curricula affect education, and also secure funds so that the final grade students in Bosnia and Herzegovina could participate in the international PISA and TIMSS assessment studies. In addition to that, internal competent educational institutions should apply external monitoring of the teaching process at an earlier stage of education.

For B&H society it is very important that the future education system forms and cultivates universal values (peace, solidarity, freedom, responsibility, equality...) and urges for the development of critical thinking.

Teachers should be given more freedom in their work, but also greater responsibility on their part should be required in terms of achieved results.



All levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina must agree on the education reform, and based on that, allocate more funds in order to eliminate regional inequality in wages and further motivate teachers who work more and achieve better results.

Textbooks should not be the obligatory teaching means, but rather a teaching aid – one of the learning sources. Apart from textbooks, a variety of materials and suggestions regarding the organization of a class should be provided for the teaching staff. Teachers should be required to share their positive experience from the classroom with their colleagues. One good example of such practice is the website www.inskola.com. Another level of teacher activity should focus on the criticism of the existing practices in education and making suggestions in order to change or improve the wrong practice. The texts published on the website for fairer education www.skolegijum.ba can serve as a good example.

Nevertheless, if we consider the signed coalition agreement of the ruling parties at the state-level, we will see that education is not included in any of the 10 items of the agenda.