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Taking the dead Muslims out of Bosnian math textbooks

The acrimonious argument that erupted this week around Education Minister Yuli Tamir's decision to put the Green Line on textbook maps has provided another example of the extent to which national disputes seep into the education system. In this respect, Israel is not alone. About 11 years after the war in Bosnia officially ended, Muslim, Serb and Croat students are still totally separated in multi-ethnic schools, and negative stereotypes continue to appear in textbooks.

"The Muslims, Serbs and Croats are continuing through their education system to do what they did not achieve in the war," says Katarina Batarilo, a researcher at the German Georg Eckert Institute, which formulates curricula and instructions for joint textbooks in Bosnia. "This is a Sisyphean task, with tiny steps forward."

Yet there already have been several palpable achievements: After the textbooks were examined, a chapter on "Civilian Defense" that taught youngsters how to throw Molotov cocktails was excised from a Serb textbook. In its stead, a chapter on civil rights was introduced.

Batarilo was visiting Israel this week as a guest of the David Yellin College of Education in Jerusalem. In recent years, she has been working on behalf of the German institute to coordinate attempts at compromise and reconciliation in Bosnia - at least regarding education. She is cautious about making a direct comparison between Bosnia and Israel, but the lesson from the partial success in Bosnia may be relevant for us, too: The textbooks were not changed by local initiatives, but rather due to international intervention, and the agreement in Bosnia largely derives from the country's desire for diplomatic achievements, such as joining the European Union.

Of Bosnia's approximately 4 million inhabitants, 74 percent are Muslim, 30 percent are Serbs and 20 percent are Croats (the last census was conducted in 1991, shortly before the war broke out). During the war, an estimated 100,000 people were killed, most of them Muslims.

"All three sides in Bosnia are inserting their views into the textbooks and the curricula," says Batarilo. One outstanding example of this can be seen in the various history books' interpretation of the 1914 assassination of Austrian heir apparent Franz Ferdinand, which led to the outbreak of World War One: The Serbs describe the assassin, Gavrilo Princip, as a hero, whereas the Croats and the Muslims call him a murderer. Another example: The Muslims' textbooks describe the Ottoman era as "a Golden Age of economic prosperity and cultural richness, but hardly address the situation of the non-Muslims. By contrast, the Serb and Croat textbooks stress the persecution of the Christians under the Muslim regime," relates Batarilo.

One school, two entrances

The war in Bosnia made communities more homogenous. However, there are still some 55 schools with ethnically mixed student bodies. According to Batarilo, "Within one school, two separate education systems operate: At 8 A.M. the Muslim students arrive, and pictures of their heroes are hung on the walls. In the afternoon, after an hour's break, the Croat students arrive - through a separate entrance, to keep them from meeting - and the maintenance staff immediately changes all the pictures. The children themselves never meet. This is not just educational segregation, but also physical, and all in the same building."

Batarilo, 30, is the daughter of Bosnian Croat parents who moved to Germany in the early 1970s. She grew up near Stuttgart, and is slated to receive a doctorate in education from Heidelberg University in a few months. For the past five years she has been closely following the changes in the Bosnian education system on behalf of the Eckert Institute. In 1999, the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) began examining the curricula of each ethnic group. In 2001, the institute took over the task.

"We analyzed the curricula with Muslim, Serb and Croat representatives to see which topics we could keep and which should be rejected. The problem was mainly with 'national topics' like history, literature, geography, language, music and art," relates Batarilo. But problems arose even in mathematics, a field where the representatives agreed what should be taught. In one textbook, she says, students were asked to solve the following problem: Fifty corpses of Muslims were found in a river. Thirty corpses were taken out. How many were left? In the wake of a joint examination, the question was excised.

Another team from the German institute formulated new history and geography textbook guidelines, which were published last year. "We found that the Serb and the Croat textbooks did not teach about the region, but rather about the glorious history of Serbia and Croatia. The Croats, for example, have been living in Bosnia for hundreds of years, but there was hardly any mention of this. Therefore, one of the first guidelines was that the starting point for the new textbooks should be Bosnia itself."

Another guideline was that textbooks should present multiple viewpoints. "In conservative education systems they always seek a single truth, but there is no need to fear the discussion of three narratives. Students should develop their own views. We have never told the Bosnians how to write textbooks. The positions were formulated together, with many arguments," she relates.

The drafting of new textbooks, along with the training of teachers to introduce them to the guidelines, are encouraging signs, "but the progress is in very small steps. The desire for change is especially evident among the younger, more Western teachers. We have even succeeded in obtaining the cooperation of the education ministries in the various provinces" (after the war, Bosnia was divided into 13 provinces). However, the use of the new textbooks is not yet obligatory, and school authorities address the issue with suspicion.

"And of course, there is the question on the extent to which these changes will influence the students, who return home and hear 'the true facts' from the family," Batarilo says.

We all carry baggage

Batarilo was invited to David Yellin College by Dr. Samira Alayan, a lecturer there and a member of the Eckert Institute's international team, and by Dr. Yehuda Bar Shalom, the head of the college's education department. About 25 percent of the college's students are Israeli Arabs.

"Just like in Bosnia, we are grappling with the same dilemmas: How can we educate for peace, how can we overcome the relative narratives? Unless we deal with these demons, our students, and then their students, will be constructing imaginary, baseless monsters," says Bar Shalom. Several dozen students attended Batarilo's lecture, and they found many parallels between Bosnia and Israel.

In a few weeks, the program "Difference and Variety in Israeli Society" will enter its second year. This is a compulsory program for all second-year students at David Yellin, and it consists of 14 meetings, comprised of a lecture on the various groups in Israeli society and workshop discussions. Last year about 150 students participated.

"We found out that all of us, Jews and Arabs, carry some sort of baggage," relates Adi Yekutieli. "I assume, for example, that the Arab students were a bit surprised to hear that as a Mizrahi [Middle Eastern] Jew I felt subject to discrimination at my school. They thought that there are no differences among us."

The beginning of the program was not easy. In the study summarizing the first year of activity, Bar Shalom, Dr. Hansa Diab and college head Dr. Anna Russo write, "When an Arab lecturer addressed the situation of Arabs in Israel, it emerged that some of the Jewish students had never heard of Ikrit and Biram or about the slaughter at Kafr Qasem." Meanwhile, some of the Arab students did not understand why they had to take an interest in certain topics: "What does it involve me, as a student of special education in Arab society, if there is racist discourse against Ethiopians at school?" one student is quoted as having said. In the workshops, too, there were often harsh arguments.

"In the workshops things came up that you don't even say to yourself, stereotypes that people usually try to hide," says Yekutieli. "We talked about issues that aren't discussed in other places. Suddenly a common denominator was found. Your mind opens to new horizons, like accepting the other and seeing things with different eyes."

Yekutieli is studying early childhood education, but she learned far more general principles from the program: "You have to make room for each student's identity and not eradicate it. There are so many minorities in Israeli society, and the right education gives expression to all of them."

Another participant, Saida Massoud, comments, "In the past, I hadn't studied with Jewish students at the college. I am an Arab and religious. When I spoke about how I am treated as though I were a monster and how people look at me in public places - people are alarmed and move away - I felt for the first time that the Jews understood me. I let out everything I had inside my soul, and I calmed down. I also learned new things. At first I thought that all the Jews were the same. Suddenly I saw things we have in common, like feelings or the struggle against prejudices."

Despite the success of the course, Bar Shalom and Alayan are not optimistic about the chances for change in the Israeli education system.

"At the college, I decided what texts we would teach, but at the school I attended in Beit Safafa, we learned Bialik and Rachel. Arab identity isn't studied, and the Education Ministry has no real desire to improve the situation. If there were such a desire, things would have changed long ago," says Alayan.