



## Hope for the English Language Teachers of Kosovo

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### Background

In 1990, Ardian Kastrati was a ninth grader at the Ivo Lola Ribar High School in Prishtina, (Pristina)<sup>1</sup> Kosovo. Only 5 months after beginning high school, Serbian police showed up at the school, rounded up all the Albanian students and kicked them out of the school. Protesting his expulsion from the school, Ardian was beaten up by the police in front of the school. He went on to complete high school in a parallel education system set up by the Albanian community in Kosovo and now works as a program officer for the US Embassy in Kosovo.

In May 2008, Ardian showed me his old school, renamed Sami Frashëri High School after a prominent leader of the Albanian Renaissance movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Now, where several thousand Albanian Kosovars study, not a single Serbian student is present. Ardian wishes for the ethnic integration that existed before 1990 in Kosovo schools.

### Ethnic Conflict

Repeated incidents of interethnic violence experienced by both Serbian and Albanian residents of Kosovo through the 1990s and even following the 1999 war have shattered the dream of ethnic harmony for the foreseeable future. This violence has been sparked by Serbia's attempts to exert more complete authority over Kosovo and by a militant movement among Kosovar Albanians which fought for independence for Kosovo.

About 85 km to the west of Prishtina lies the city of Gjakova (Djakovica), population 90,000. In March and April of 1999, Gjakova experienced some of the worst violence inflicted by Serbian police, army and militias intent on cleansing the area of its Albanian population. On the night of April 1, Serbian police and militiamen are alleged to have murdered at least 55 persons in Gjakova, "including 20 women and children who were shot when they were found hiding in the basement of a pool hall" (*Washington Post*, 30 April 1999). Shops, homes and marketplaces in the town were set aflame. Refugees fleeing villages around Gjakova were accosted by Serb militiamen, who separated the adult males from the groups and then executed them by the hundreds.

<sup>1</sup> Albanian versions of place names are used throughout with the Serbian version in parentheses.

### Teacher Training for Trauma Victims

In February 2009, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague found 5 top Serbian officials guilty for war crimes committed in the 1999 conflict. Nearly a year before that, in May 2008, 37 English teachers from Gjakova and surrounding villages came to attend workshops I conducted under sponsorship of the US Embassy in Kosovo and the Kosovo Education Center. What had these teachers experienced of the horrors of 1999? How many had lost family members? How have the children in their classes been affected by the traumas suffered during these atrocities? These were questions that I pondered as I looked out over this group.

### A Divided Society

The personal experience of Ardian and my encounter with teachers from Gjakova depict for us a society with strong ethnic divides and minimal opportunity for people to communicate with one another across cultural barriers or even to become familiar with and appreciate their cultural



### Kosovo Basic Facts



- Population estimate: 1.9 million
- Ethnic groups: Albanian, Serbian, Bosniak, Gorani, Roma and Turk
- Declared independence from Serbia: 17 February 2008
- Formally recognized by 60 UN member states, including 22 EU members
- Location: Landlocked among the countries of Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Serbia
- Capital: Prishtina (Pristina)
- Official languages: Albanian, Serbian
- Literacy: 91.9%

similarities and differences. Ethnic groups have been separated and manipulated by their leaders to distrust and hate their neighbors. Since Kosovo's autonomy was revoked in 1989, and even before that, violence has been ongoing, repeated, widespread, and brutal. Today in this small country the size of Lebanon or the Japanese prefecture of Niigata, over 14,000 NATO troops are still stationed to prevent violence from breaking out.

### Teaching, Texts and Contexts

These stories reveal a great deal about the challenges facing English language teachers in Kosovo. They have important implications for providing these teachers with appropriate in-service education. Textbooks on language teaching methodology sometimes overlook a truth widely acknowledged in texts with other focuses: language instruction does not take place in a socio-political vacuum. The approaches that we train teachers to use in their classrooms must be selected in light of the local history of a people because the environment for teacher development is shaped by this history.

Martha Cabrera, a psychologist writing in the context of her native Nicaragua, plagued by political violence for more than 10 years from 1978 to 1990, stresses that we cannot ignore the personal history of the people—students we are trying to teach and teachers whom we are trying to train—people whose traumas matter to them whether or not they have acknowledged them. As Cabrera and other trauma experts note, trauma is lasting; it is not confined to an individual's past: "pain doesn't run on chronological time, which is only one way of measuring time. It runs on psychological time, which moves to a different beat. When a person is raped, the body has a memory of that violation. When a person suffers sexual abuse at age 5, that wound remains in the present even if the person is now 30. The memory may be blocked for survival purposes, but it will be present in many forms: nightmares, fears, ways of relating to others, the person's health" (p. 10).

### Dealing With Children and Trauma

A watchword in trauma studies is that trauma which is not transformed will be transferred (Yoder, 2005). Among other possibilities, this means that trauma and trauma-induced ways of behaving can be passed on to the next generation, who may have had no direct experience of rape, war or natural disaster. It also means traumatized persons may inflict violence on those around them.

According to Levine and Kline (2007), children's responses to trauma are distinctively different from adults' because they don't have either the cognitive or often the physical abilities to access a range of options that might bring relief from these symptoms. They are completely dependent on caregivers. And many caregivers also lack the personal resources needed to access healthy options for healing children's traumas or may be suffering from trauma themselves.

Levine & Kline note that school-going children may exhibit more signs of trauma at school than at home because of the additional

academic and social stresses that they feel there. One of the key symptoms of unresolved trauma in children is an inability to self-regulate. Children and adolescents may *act out*, by exhibiting aggression toward others; *space out* by showing inattentiveness and withdrawing from engagement with the class; and *act in*, numbing themselves through food, music, sex, drugs, cutting, and other forms of self-harm (Levine & Kline, 2007). English teachers with trauma-affected children in their classrooms must learn to cope constructively with many behavior problems; teachers and learners together face very tough challenges.

### EFL Workshops for Peacebuilding

The US Embassy in Prishtina invited me to Kosovo for ELT workshops to demonstrate how to integrate peace-building concepts with effective practices in English language teaching. More than 275 English teachers attended these workshops held in 6 major cities. In light of Kosovo's violent history and my rudimentary knowledge of the effects of trauma on children, my goal was to raise issues related to trauma-healing and non-violent conflict transformation in a way that would be non-threatening to teachers with a focus on creative solutions to seemingly intractable conflict and the need for forgiveness of those who brought harm in order to move on to a more hopeful future.

I saw the potential that Kosovo ELTs have to be peacebuilders and trauma-healers in their own society—to teach communication skills that build intercultural understanding and to teach a language (English) that can be a medium of communication between groups that are suspicious of each other or completely hostile. In Kosovo, as well as many other places in the world, English can be a neutral language. People need not be not forced to speak in the language of those whom they consider an enemy or oppressor.<sup>2</sup>

### Six Principles

The English teacher training workshops that I conducted in Kosovo were built on the following six principles:

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<sup>2</sup> Building on the idea of a 'neutral language,' the US Embassy in Kosovo has sponsored a grass-roots program for promoting inter-ethnic cooperation called ACCESS in which Kosovar youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds study English together and enjoy extracurricular activities. Whereas in schools, Serb and Albanian children are kept in separate classrooms, the ACCESS classes bring children together. In the words of the Embassy's news release, "Students forge friendships that bridge the ethnic and linguistic divide."

1. **Maintain a sense of safety.** Majority Albanians and all the ethnic minorities in Kosovo need to have a sense of safety restored; all have suffered at the hands of others. Trauma-healing can only happen in a safe space.
2. **Build a learning community.** As a key to safety, I began each workshop by trying to build community among participants by making space for them to become acquainted with each other in small groups using carefully structured activities that could be implemented as language learning activities in their classrooms.
3. **Foster creative problem solving, especially in relation to conflicts.** The trust developed during community building was put to use as participants ventured creative solutions to conflicts portrayed through stories, such as one involving a boy who became the victim of neighborhood bullies.
4. **Appeal to all senses by exploiting multiple intelligences.** Workshops allowed participants to experience language learning through discussion, introspective writing, nature, music, drama, art, photos and living sculptures — techniques which allowed them to draw on a range of sensations and emotions, important elements in fostering healing and learning for trauma victims (Levine & Kline, 2007).
5. **Allow teachers and learners space to mourn their traumas.** For healing to happen, victims must escape the vicious cycles of violence and victimhood by acknowledging their traumas and grieving them (Yoder, 2005). Participants designed and wrote the text for book covers themed on the defining moments of their lives. Not all chose traumatic experiences, but many did: some were personal traumas while others focused on experiences during the 1999 war.
6. **Attempt to redirect the trauma narratives that victims tell.** It is natural for trauma victims to narrate their experiences in ways that demonize the perpetrators and, thus, perpetuate enmity and violent conflict. Because I did not feel comfortable raising directly the issue of Albanian-Serb enmity, I developed a unit of materials related to the end of apartheid in South Africa, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and stories related by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999). In this way, participants focused on ways that other victims of violence have transformed their trauma, opening up hopeful space for them to deal later with their own and their students' traumas.

## Conclusion

Among the many shattered places in our world, Kosovo is one where much healing needs to happen. Every profession has its role to play in healing a country and restoring its resilience—lawyers, judges and police who try to help victims of war crimes find justice and closure to past wounds; politicians and bureaucrats who try to create government structures that restore balance in society, offer a sense of security, and provide good governance; farms and businesses that invest in developing goods and services that meet crucial survival needs; health care professionals who provide resources for healing of bodies and minds from traumas induced by human cruelties. Educators can also bring a whole host of benefits, many of which intersect with the needs for justice, good governance, commerce, and health.

As in any society that wants to engage with the world, there are opportunities for English teachers in Kosovo. Like other professionals, English teachers can play a role in bringing healing to Kosovo. In fact, they can only teach effectively if they recognize the trauma suffered by themselves and by children in their classrooms, and then adapt their teaching to the needs of the situation. This is my hope not just for the English teachers of Kosovo, but for English teachers everywhere who carry on in the aftermath of traumatic events.

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