

Language and Libraries: Expanding Educational Resources for Kosovar Youth Through English Learning and Library Access

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Purpose and Background

Kosovo, a Balkan country with a turbulent history, still experiences a certain degree of instability as a result of ethnic tensions lingering from the war in the 1990s. Marking the end of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Kosovo war occurred during 1998-1999 as a result of territorial disputes rooted in ethnic animosities between Serbs and Albanians.¹ While the stability of Kosovo has certainly improved since then, education is still a significant problem. Two of the main obstacles that children face in order to be successful at school are: (i) little to no access to local libraries due to fees, physical access and lack of books and resources in those libraries, and (ii) limited educational resources online due to the poor presence of the Albanian language on the internet. For Valdrin, English has been an important tool for success throughout his childhood growing up in Kosovo. He was among a few other students who pursued English private lessons, and since then he has had opportunities to work with a variety of organizations and obtain grants to help his local community. The small number of native speakers of the Albanian language can serve as an obstacle to opportunities, or even simply to access information online. Internet searches are vague and don't have enough to offer in Albanian, but English searches expand the accessibility of information especially for educational purposes. After the war a number of international organizations moved to Kosovo to help build a functional state. One of these organizations was UNICEF.² At the age of sixteen, utilizing his English speaking skills, Valdrin won his first grant through UNICEF where he had the chance to implement a project that aimed to promote and encourage experimental work for science classes, something that was not existent due to the lack of science laboratories in his public school. This is an example of the way in which knowledge of English can be a transformative skill in Kosovo today. Through this project, we hope to tackle the above two challenges that children in Kosovo face today. We want to remove the barriers to getting registered and accessing resources in local libraries, and to help improve the English skills of students so that they're able to access online educational materials in English, as well as other professional opportunities, in order to complement the limited resources in libraries.

Project Description

Our project seeks to create more equitable access to educational resources to all children in Kosovo. To realize these goals our project will consist of three phases: an English language course, connection with libraries, and a conference. The first phase of our project will be an English language course that focuses on the basic language learning principles in a more casual and enjoyable way so that kids can access English during the summer. This four-week language program will not serve as a substitution to any English language teaching during the school year, but rather as an additional opportunity to foster interest in kids beyond their school curriculums. This course will focus on reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills while doing so in a more engaging way for students. This will include reading an English language children's book (which will also be gifted to each participant at the end), writing short stories or journals, listening to movies or songs, and speaking through a series of games. Games have been proven as one of the most effective means of language retention in young children.³ This course will meet five days a week, 4 hours a day, for four weeks. During each hour we will focus on a different language skill (reading, writing, etc.) with a lunch break in between hours 2 and 3. In order to help us conduct our course, we will also hire interns with ESL teaching expertise to assist us in teaching and other classroom activities. They will be paid and will be part of the team throughout the project.

Participants in this program will range from ages 8-12 years old and will come from different areas of the region. The course will take place in Elementary School "Edith Durham" Mushtisht in the city of Suhareka, but all the kids from the region are welcome to apply. In particular, we will focus our outreach to children living in neighboring diverse communities such as Dolloc, Maqiteve, Bagevc, Dubrave, Savrove, Popolan, Dvaran. All interested participants in the program can apply in different forms including registration events and an online document, which will be spread through social media and word of mouth. We will also be working to create posters to place around the region in schools and

¹ BBC News. "Kosovo Profile – Timeline."

² <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/what-we-do>

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331651454_THE_EFFECT_OF_GAMES_ON_VOCABULARY_RETENTION

community centers. Additionally, this English program will be open for kids with different levels of English, and Elementary School “Edith Durham” Mushtisht has designated us 2-3 classrooms to hold different sessions simultaneously based on the English proficiency of the students. We will provide pre and post evaluations to the youth we teach to assess the effectiveness of our sessions. Furthermore, through a group of 12 volunteers who have committed to assisting with the implementation for our project, we will be able to provide transportation to all participating children in the greater Suhareka area. These participants range from young legal professionals to NGO workers to recent high school graduates.

While English is taught in all public and private schools in Kosovo, there are not many opportunities to further interact with the English language outside of class if one cannot afford it. Valdrin was fortunate to participate in an after school program to learn English, but for many kids the library is their only option. Furthermore, Valdrin noticed his local library only had a few English novels or books, which were not accessible for early language learners. Additionally, in attending a local public school in Mushtisht, he noticed many classmates who could not afford to buy the books for classes and would subsequently not do the readings for class and fall further behind in school or drop out because of it. Valdrin, however, was registered at the local library and thus was able to access his school books there. Local libraries can serve as wonderful resources for young students beyond simply a safe place to learn, which include helping students access the books they need to continue their education successfully. In turn, the second phase of our project will be to host registration events throughout a two- week period in conjunction with the English language intensive program to get kids registered at their local libraries. One of the uses of our project funding will be to fund a one- year registration for all the kids who participate in our English language program. Furthermore, we will supply City Library “Hajdin Berisha” and Elementary School “Edith Durham” Library with a large supply of appropriate English books for kids. Prior to going to Kosovo, we will either purchase books in the U.S and then ship them to Kosovo via FEDEX, or we can purchase them in local Kosovar bookstores such as Dukagjini Library. This will depend on what is most cost efficient closer to the date of our program. Along with these books that will be purchased with the project’s funds, we will be collecting books in the U.S and shipping them to Kosovo prior to our arrival there. A number of these books will be donated by “Bernie’s Book Bank” in Lake Bluff, which is a local children’s charity who ‘empowers under-served children to read their way to a better life’.⁴ Additionally, a few departments including the Admissions office and the Intercultural house (“Rosemary House”) here at Lake Forest College have agreed to donate some of their books for our project.

Project Sustainability

These two phases will culminate in a conference in which educators and librarians will meet to discuss how to further collaboration between schools and their local libraries. While, through the fellowship, we will sponsor kids who participate in the English language course to be registered at the City library, this conference will ensure other educators and librarians see the value of this type of partnership and work to create more opportunities for library registration and cooperation in the future. To ensure the sustainability of our programming, we will work with these educators and librarians to write a letter to government officials depicting a potential program in which kids who are recipients of financial aid in schools can receive government aid to register for their local libraries, as it will help them stay in school and benefit the Republic of Kosovo in the long term.⁵ Despite ethnic tensions, there is consensus when it comes to education. This project seeks to promote cross-ethnic cooperation and interaction with this goal in mind while reaching young people to promote English language learning, involvement with local libraries, and an overall reinvigoration of the importance of staying in school.

About us

Valdrin Halitjaha was born and raised in Kosovo, and is fluent in Albanian (official language in Kosovo) and English. He is a double major in Economics and International Relations with a minor in Entrepreneurship. Valdrin attended UWC Maastricht where he was the president of Amnesty International Club. He also interned at UNICEF Innovations Lab in Kosovo, and his interests are politics, emancipation of minors, and sports. Lindsey Johnson is a native English speaker and is graduating this spring at Colgate University with a double major in Peace & Conflict Studies and Russian & Eurasian Studies. During her semester abroad in Moscow, she worked at Kids are Kids Center (a local NGO) to teach English to refugee and migrant children from ages 7-20. She hopes to work in international development.

⁴ <https://www.berniesbookbank.org/>

⁵ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1520160