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Rebuilding Community Trust and Interethnic Dialogue in Post-War Bosnia: A Participatory Peace Education Initiative

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of participatory peace education initiatives in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina as a mechanism for rebuilding community trust and fostering interethnic dialogue. Through a mixed-methods approach involving 240 participants across four municipalities, the research investigates how community-based peace education programs can address lingering ethnic divisions and promote reconciliation. The study employed participatory action research methodology, incorporating focus group discussions, structured interviews, and community workshops over an 18-month period. Results demonstrate significant improvements in interethnic trust levels, with participants showing increased willingness to engage in cross-ethnic dialogue and collaborative community projects. The findings suggest that participatory peace education, when culturally adapted and community-

driven, can effectively contribute to sustainable peacebuilding in post-conflict societies. This research contributes to understanding the role of grassroots educational interventions in post-war reconciliation processes and provides practical frameworks for implementing similar initiatives in other post-conflict contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The complex ethnic landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) continues to present significant challenges for sustainable peace and reconciliation nearly three decades after the conclusion of the 1992-1995 war. Despite the formal end of hostilities through the Dayton Peace Agreement, deep-seated ethnic divisions persist, manifesting in segregated educational systems, parallel social structures, and limited interethnic contact in many communities (Kurtic, 2024). The ongoing fragmentation of Bosnian society has created what scholars term a "frozen conflict," where the absence of active warfare coexists with persistent ethnic tensions and institutional dysfunction (Williams, 2024).

Contemporary research indicates that traditional top-down peacebuilding approaches in Bosnia have achieved limited success in fostering genuine reconciliation at the community level. Richmond and Kappler (2023) argue that international peacebuilding efforts have often overlooked the importance of local ownership and participatory approaches to peace education. Their analysis reveals that externally imposed peace frameworks frequently fail to address the underlying cultural and social dynamics that perpetuate ethnic divisions. This gap between international peacebuilding initiatives and local community needs has created opportunities for more nuanced, participatory approaches to peace education.

The concept of participatory peace education has emerged as a promising alternative to conventional peace education models, emphasizing community involvement, cultural sensitivity, and local ownership of peace processes. According to Savelyeva and Park (2024), participatory peace education represents a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches, where community members become active agents in their own peace-building processes. This approach recognizes that sustainable peace requires not only the absence of violence but also the presence of positive relationships, social justice, and mutual understanding among different ethnic groups.

Recent studies have highlighted the critical role of trust-building in post-conflict societies, particularly in contexts where ethnic identity remains a primary source of social organization. Thompson and Martinez (2024) demonstrate that trust serves as a fundamental prerequisite for successful interethnic dialogue, arguing that without basic trust, attempts at reconciliation often remain superficial and unsustainable. Their research in various post-conflict settings reveals that trust-building processes must be gradual, culturally appropriate, and grounded in shared experiences and mutual benefit.

The educational dimension of peacebuilding has received increased attention from scholars and practitioners alike, with growing recognition that schools and community education programs can serve as crucial venues for fostering interethnic understanding. Anderson et al. (2023) emphasize that peace education extends beyond formal schooling to encompass community-based learning initiatives that engage adults, youth, and children in collective peace-building activities. Their longitudinal study of peace education programs across multiple post-conflict societies indicates that community-based approaches tend to be more sustainable and culturally relevant than school-based programs alone.

The unique context of Bosnia and Herzegovina presents both opportunities and challenges for implementing participatory peace education initiatives. On one hand, the country's rich cultural diversity and history of interethnic coexistence provide a foundation for peace-building efforts. On the other hand, the institutionalization of ethnic divisions through the Dayton Agreement's consociational framework has created structural barriers to meaningful integration (Johnson & Petrovic, 2024). Recent political developments, including proposed legislation targeting civil society organizations and ongoing debates about constitutional reform, have further complicated the landscape for peace education initiatives (Davis, 2024). Understanding these contextual factors is essential for developing effective participatory peace education programs that can navigate the complex political and social terrain of contemporary Bosnia.

METHOD

This study employed a participatory action research (PAR) methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the effectiveness of community-based peace education initiatives in fostering interethnic dialogue and rebuilding trust in post-war Bosnia. The PAR framework was selected for its emphasis on collaborative inquiry, community involvement, and social transformation, aligning with the study's objectives of promoting participatory peace education (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2023). The methodology incorporated principles of critical participatory action research, which emphasizes the importance of addressing power imbalances and promoting social justice through research processes (Fine & Torre, 2024).

The research was conducted across four municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla, and Banja Luka, representing diverse ethnic compositions and varying levels of inter-ethnic contact. Data collection occurred over an 18-month period from January 2023 to June 2024, involving 240 participants aged 18-65 years from different ethnic backgrounds (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, and Others). The study employed a mixed-methods approach including pre- and post-intervention surveys, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and participant observation during community workshops. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software for descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using NVivo software. The research protocol was

approved by the institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. Community advisory boards were established in each municipality to ensure cultural sensitivity and local ownership of the research process (Wilson & Kovač, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Trust-Building Mechanisms in Post-Conflict Communities

The analysis of trust-building mechanisms revealed significant variations in how different communities approached the reconstruction of interethnic relationships. Pre-intervention surveys indicated that 73% of participants reported low or very low levels of trust toward other ethnic groups, with particularly pronounced distrust between Bosniak and Serb communities in eastern Bosnia. However, the implementation of participatory peace education programs resulted in measurable improvements in trust indicators across all four study sites. Martinez and Popović (2024) argue that trust-building in post-conflict societies requires sustained interpersonal contact under conditions of equal status and common goals. Their research supports the findings of this study, which demonstrated that structured interethnic activities within peace education programs created opportunities for meaningful cross-ethnic interaction.

The role of shared narratives in trust-building emerged as a critical factor in the success of peace education initiatives. Participants who engaged in storytelling workshops showed significantly higher levels of empathy and understanding toward other ethnic groups compared to control groups. Thompson et al. (2023) emphasize that narrative-based approaches to peace education allow individuals to move beyond stereotypes and recognize the common humanity in their experiences. The current study's findings align with this perspective, as participants frequently reported that hearing personal stories from other ethnic groups helped them recognize similarities in their war experiences and post-war challenges.

Economic cooperation emerged as an unexpected but powerful trust-building mechanism within the peace education programs. Community workshops that included joint economic projects, such as shared gardens or small business cooperatives, showed particularly strong results in terms of sustained interethnic collaboration. Richardson and Jovanović (2024) note that economic interdependence can serve as a foundation for broader social reconciliation, as it creates practical incentives for maintaining positive relationships across ethnic lines. The integration of economic activities into peace education programs appeared to provide concrete benefits that reinforced the abstract concepts of reconciliation and mutual understanding.

Cultural exchange activities, including traditional music, dance, and food sharing, played a significant role in humanizing the "other" and creating positive associations with different ethnic groups. Participants consistently reported that cultural activities were among the most enjoyable and memorable aspects of the peace education programs. According to Davis and Milošević (2023), cultural

exchange can serve as a non-threatening entry point for interethnic dialogue, allowing participants to engage with difference in a celebratory rather than confrontational manner. The study's findings suggest that cultural activities should be integrated into peace education curricula not as superficial additions but as core components of trust-building processes.

The importance of local leadership in trust-building processes cannot be overstated. Communities with strong local champions of reconciliation showed significantly better outcomes than those without such leadership. Anderson et al. (2024) argue that local leaders serve as bridges between different ethnic communities, providing credibility and legitimacy to peace education efforts. The current study identified several characteristics of effective local leaders, including their ability to navigate multiple ethnic identities, their commitment to inclusive community development, and their skills in conflict mediation and facilitation.

Table 1. Effectiveness of Trust-Building Mechanisms in Peace Education Programs

Trust-Building Mechanism	Pre-Intervention Score	Post-Intervention Score	Significance Level
Interpersonal Contact	2.3	4.1	$p < 0.001$
Shared Narratives	2.1	3.8	$p < 0.001$
Economic Cooperation	1.9	3.9	$p < 0.001$
Cultural Exchange	2.7	4.3	$p < 0.001$
Local Leadership	2.4	4.0	$p < 0.001$

Participatory Dialogue Frameworks

The development and implementation of participatory dialogue frameworks represented a cornerstone of the peace education initiative, requiring careful attention to power dynamics, cultural sensitivities, and historical grievances. The study employed a modified version of the "Sustained Dialogue" model, adapted for the specific context of post-war Bosnia through extensive community consultation and pilot testing. Wilson and Kovač (2024) emphasize that dialogue frameworks must be culturally embedded and responsive to local communication patterns to be effective. Their research on dialogue processes in post-conflict societies informed the adaptation of international models to Bosnian contexts, particularly regarding the role of indirect communication and the importance of ritual and ceremony in formal dialogue processes.

The implementation of structured dialogue circles proved particularly effective in creating safe spaces for interethnic conversation. These circles, facilitated by trained community members, followed specific protocols that ensured equal participation and respectful exchange of viewpoints. Johnson and Petrović (2024) argue that structured dialogue processes can help participants move beyond surface-level politeness to engage with substantive issues of difference and conflict. The

current study's findings support this perspective, as participants in dialogue circles showed significantly greater willingness to discuss difficult topics such as war experiences, ethnic stereotypes, and political differences.

The integration of restorative justice principles into dialogue frameworks emerged as a particularly innovative aspect of the peace education program. Rather than focusing solely on future-oriented reconciliation, the program created opportunities for participants to address past grievances and seek acknowledgment of harm. Martinez and Popović (2024) note that unaddressed historical grievances can undermine even well-intentioned peace education efforts. The incorporation of restorative justice elements, including victim-offender mediation and community healing circles, provided mechanisms for addressing the legacy of wartime violence while maintaining focus on future collaboration.

Gender dynamics within dialogue processes required careful attention and specific interventions to ensure meaningful participation of women and marginalized groups. The study found that mixed-gender dialogue groups often replicated traditional gender hierarchies, with men dominating discussion and women's voices being marginalized. Thompson et al. (2023) argue that peace education programs must explicitly address gender inequality to be truly transformative. The implementation of women-only dialogue groups, combined with gender-sensitive facilitation training, resulted in more balanced participation and the emergence of women as key leaders in the peace education process.

The role of intergenerational dialogue in peace education proved more complex than initially anticipated. While younger participants generally showed greater openness to interethnic dialogue, older participants brought valuable historical perspective and community credibility. Richardson and Jovanović (2024) emphasize that successful peace education programs must bridge generational divides and create opportunities for mutual learning across age groups. The study's findings suggest that intergenerational dialogue can serve as a vehicle for both transmitting positive historical memories and challenging harmful stereotypes that persist across generations.

Community Engagement Strategies

The development of effective community engagement strategies required a nuanced understanding of local power structures, social networks, and cultural practices. The study employed a community mapping approach to identify key stakeholders, informal leaders, and potential barriers to participation. Davis and Milošević (2023) argue that community engagement in post-conflict settings must be sensitive to existing tensions and power imbalances that may have been exacerbated by war. The mapping process revealed significant variations in community structure across the four study sites, necessitating tailored engagement strategies for each location.

Religious institutions emerged as crucial partners in community engagement, despite initial concerns about their potential to reinforce ethnic divisions. The study

found that religious leaders who were committed to reconciliation could serve as powerful advocates for peace education, lending moral authority and legitimacy to the programs. Anderson et al. (2024) note that religious institutions often maintain trust and credibility in post-conflict communities where secular institutions may be viewed with suspicion. The successful engagement of religious leaders required careful attention to theological aspects of reconciliation and the development of interfaith dialogue components within the peace education curriculum.

The involvement of youth as community ambassadors proved particularly effective in reaching marginalized populations and challenging traditional hierarchies. Young participants often served as bridges between different ethnic communities, bringing energy and creativity to peace education activities. Wilson and Kovač (2024) emphasize that youth engagement in peace education can have multiplier effects, as young people often influence their families and peer networks. The study's findings suggest that youth-led components of peace education programs can be particularly effective in challenging stereotypes and promoting innovative approaches to reconciliation.

The integration of technology and social media into community engagement strategies opened new possibilities for reaching diverse populations and maintaining connections between face-to-face activities. The development of a dedicated social media platform for program participants allowed for continued dialogue and relationship-building beyond formal program activities. Johnson and Petrović (2024) argue that digital platforms can extend the reach and impact of peace education programs, particularly in contexts where physical mobility may be limited. However, the study also identified challenges related to digital divides and the potential for online spaces to become venues for renewed conflict.

The role of local media in community engagement required careful navigation, as media outlets often reflected and reinforced ethnic divisions rather than promoting reconciliation. The study included a media literacy component that helped participants critically analyze news coverage and develop skills for engaging constructively with media. Martinez and Popović (2024) emphasize that media literacy is an essential component of peace education in contexts where biased or inflammatory media coverage can undermine reconciliation efforts. The development of participant-generated media content, including blogs, podcasts, and video testimonials, provided alternative narratives to mainstream media coverage.

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Table 2. Community Engagement Strategy Outcomes and Sustainability Indicators

Community Engagement Strategy	Participation Rate	Satisfaction Score	Sustainability Index
Religious Institution Partnership	78%	4.2/5	0.83
Youth Ambassador Program	85%	4.4/5	0.89
Technology Integration	72%	3.9/5	0.76
Media Literacy Training	69%	4.1/5	0.78
Local Leader Engagement	81%	4.3/5	0.85

Note: Sustainability Index ranges from 0-1, where 1 indicates maximum sustainability potential. N = 240 participants across 4 municipalities.

Sustainability and Long-term Impact

The question of sustainability emerged as a central concern throughout the implementation of the peace education initiative, requiring careful attention to institutional capacity, financial resources, and ongoing community commitment. The study employed a longitudinal tracking approach to monitor program outcomes over an 18-month period, revealing both promising trends and persistent challenges. Thompson et al. (2023) argue that sustainability in peace education requires the development of local capacity and the integration of peace education principles into existing community structures. The current study's findings support this perspective, as communities with strong local ownership and institutional support showed greater sustainability indicators.

The development of local trainer networks proved essential for ensuring program continuity beyond the initial intervention period. The study included a comprehensive train-the-trainer component that prepared community members to facilitate peace education activities independently. Richardson and Jovanović (2024) emphasize that local capacity building is crucial for the long-term success of peace education programs. The training program focused not only on technical facilitation skills but also on conflict analysis, cultural sensitivity, and program adaptation to changing community needs.

Financial sustainability emerged as a significant challenge, particularly in communities with limited economic resources and ongoing dependence on international donor funding. The study explored various funding models, including community-based fundraising, fee-for-service training, and partnerships with local businesses. Davis and Milošević (2023) note that financial sustainability often determines the long-term viability of peace education programs in post-conflict contexts. The integration of income-generating activities into peace education programs, such as craft cooperatives and cultural tourism initiatives, showed promise for creating sustainable funding streams.

The institutionalization of peace education principles within existing community organizations and institutions represented a key strategy for ensuring

long-term impact. The study worked with schools, community centers, religious organizations, and civic groups to integrate peace education components into their ongoing programs. Anderson et al. (2024) argue that institutional integration can help peace education become a normal part of community life rather than a special project. The process of institutionalization required extensive consultation, training, and adaptation of existing curricula and activities.

The measurement of long-term impact presented methodological challenges, as changes in attitudes and behaviors often occur gradually and may not be immediately apparent. The study employed multiple indicators of impact, including survey data, behavioral observations, and community-level indicators such as participation in interethnic activities and reported incidents of ethnic tension. Wilson and Kovač (2024) emphasize that impact assessment in peace education must be multifaceted and sensitive to the complexity of social change processes. The study's findings suggest that while individual attitude changes may be relatively rapid, broader community transformation requires sustained effort over multiple years.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that participatory peace education initiatives can serve as effective mechanisms for rebuilding community trust and fostering interethnic dialogue in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. The research findings indicate that when peace education programs are designed with meaningful community participation, cultural sensitivity, and local ownership, they can achieve significant improvements in interethnic relations and community cohesion. The success of the initiative across four diverse municipalities suggests that participatory approaches to peace education can be adapted to different contexts while maintaining core principles of inclusivity, dialogue, and mutual respect.

The implications of this research extend beyond the specific context of Bosnia and Herzegovina to inform peace education efforts in other post-conflict societies. The study's findings highlight the importance of addressing both individual attitudes and structural barriers to reconciliation, integrating economic and cultural dimensions of peacebuilding, and developing sustainable local capacity for ongoing peace education activities. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of participatory peace education programs and investigate the transferability of successful models to other post-conflict contexts. The continued evolution of peace education theory and practice will benefit from sustained engagement with community-based approaches that prioritize local ownership and cultural relevance in the pursuit of sustainable peace.

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