Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Power of Discovering Our Shared Humanity

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Schools in post-conflict contexts face a unique set of challenges, trying to forge a path forward in societies that often remain deeply divided. In such environments, violence is far from an abstract concept confined to the pages of history books; its legacy remains present in multiple ways.

Two cases, from opposite ends of the European continent, provide fascinating vantage points from which to look at the role of schools: in both Northern Ireland and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the persistence of sectarian outlooks and a lack of political will to overcome them have hindered progress towards unity. In these parallel interviews, Shelley McKeown Jones and Sabina Čehajić-Clancy explore how the words, stories, and lessons spoken in classrooms every day can make a real difference. Understanding the effective approaches for overcoming divisions and fostering empathy and trust between groups in post-conflict contexts provide useful lessons about how to build stronger and more cohesive societies everywhere.

Green European Journal: **The 1995 Dayton Peace Accords were designed to put an end to the violent conflict in Bosnia- Herzegovina. But has another consequence been to cement certain divisions? If so, how are these manifested in the education system?**

Sabina Čehajić-Clancy: As well as being a peace agreement, this accord is our constitution: it sets up and structures our country and society, including education. That framework, which was simply handed to us, is by nature segregated. The system itself and the structures in place entrench and sometimes deepen the issues that arose through the conflict.

So our hands are tied to begin with, and it becomes difficult to even imagine, let alone implement measures to overcome segregation and promote inclusive education. As a result, peacebuilding in education has been completely taken over by the non-formal sector: NGOs, foundations, civil society organisations, and international organisations such as UN agencies. The formal educational system leaves little room for manoeuvre. If anything, these education structures are creating further divisions. We have 14 ministries that are in some way responsible for education. Fourteen, for a country of not even 3 million people! In Bosnia, the political elite in power has barely changed since Dayton. Their goal is not sustainable peace, integration, or inclusivity. Rather it is to maintain division, because this allows them to retain power. While there is no lack of good practices being implemented by the non-formal education sector, without addressing these questions at a

formal structural level, it's hard to foresee a sustainable solution.

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directly to us is not an easy task.*

What are the biggest challenges in education in Bosnia-Herzegovina?

One of the main issues is that the country has become very homogenised, both in terms of the country as a whole, and in the cities, cantons, and villages. There are a few exceptions – communities where people from different ethnic national groups live together on relatively good terms – but, generally speaking, the country is physically segregated.

This homogenisation has been one of the most important consequences of the war. When you look at ethnic distribution before the war, it was generally a very blurred and mixed picture. But now the lines have been clearly drawn. This prevents any meaningful sustained contact with others. It is not that people never encounter those from other groups; they do, but it is a superficial form of contact. To create deeper bonds we need to live next to each other, and with each other; to share our daily lives. The second problem is the way we talk or don't talk about the past and the conflict. What happened during the war is simply not addressed in formal education. It is as if history stopped in the early 1990s. Children and young people learn about it from other sources: from parents, the media, their peers, social media. These information sources are more biased than formal education, at least in theory.

Do competing historical narratives make it difficult to devise a single curriculum for all communities?

Competing narratives definitely exist and introducing them in formal education could just add more fuel to the fire. It all depends on the decision-makers. It is those who are in power and who make decisions on education who determine the process and its broader goal. Today their goal is not to create a peaceful and integrated society. As such, the better solution may be to avoid bringing these issues to the table at all in a formal sense while they are in power.

Learning about the conflict and its history is a very demanding task, psychologically speaking. It's not an easy process to engage and come to terms with the past when it relates directly to us. If someone learns about atrocities committed by a group they love and with which they identify, this can put them in a very heightened emotional state and generate a lot of discomfort. Doing this in the wrong way can make the situation much worse. This is why some argue it's better not to talk about it at all; to brush it under the carpet rather than risk opening Pandora's box.

That doesn't mean it's impossible. As painful as it is to unpack different narratives and a difficult past, we have to do it. I believe there is a way to talk about the past, including conflict, without adding to divisions. But this requires a high degree of involvement and control from all stakeholders. It's not enough to just get young people from different groups around the table and hope for a positive outcome.

Your work focuses on the psychological dimensions of conflict resolution. How does this inform the approaches you advocate for children and young people?

It starts with the premise that moral judgments are among the key drivers of how we behave towards others. If "we" perceive and judge "them" as being not only all the same, but also as being immoral – as being a homogenous, immoral social group, the "bad guys" – that's where the problem starts. In post-conflict societies, these perceptions are accentuated because atrocities were committed. And they don't come out of nowhere; they are maintained and fuelled by truths and facts on all sides. There is no side that hasn't done anything wrong. People just pick and choose which wrongs to focus on. The goal is not to revise history or minimise immorality, but to stretch our understanding and perspective of who "they" are and what "they" have done, to understand "their" role in our shared history. We do this by focusing on and documenting the stories of what we call "moral exemplars". These are individuals who, during the war, put themselves at risk in some way to protect or save the life of a member of a different social group; an "out-group" member. For example, the story of a Bosnian Serb who saved his Muslim neighbours and was killed by his own people as a result. These were gestures that went beyond just helping others, associated as they were with important risks.

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We documented these moral exemplar stories, which are part of history, part of the truth. Yet they are not the stories that are taught, shared, or reported on. This allows for an expansion of what we know and how we think about history, particularly the history of the conflict. We then presented them to our participants and tested for any shifts in their thinking and feeling about and behaviour towards social out-groups. We observed strong effects across a range of variables. Crucially, we observed positive changes in inter-group trust, greater levels of forgiveness, increased hope for reconciled and better futures in our societies, and a stronger intention to engage with out- group members.

Most importantly, we have been able to replicate the success of this intervention across different contexts and cultures, including Armenian-Turkish relations, Polish- German relations, and most recently Serbian and Albanian relations. We also have data from Sweden, not a post-conflict country but one that is complex and culturally more heterogeneous now than ever before. We are also working on relations between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Pakistan. The fact that this approach works every time tells us that there is something very powerful behind it. This can and should be used in teaching about history and conflict in order to bring about sustained peace and better relations.

Controlling the content of the discussions that happen during contact between people from different groups has been shown to work. This demonstrates that there is a way to bring kids together, to bring the past to the discussion table, and to make it work. Instead of experiencing greater levels of animosity and prejudice and less tolerance, they walk out of these interventions feeling more hopeful, more trusting, and more forgiving towards the

other.

You stress the importance of emotions for cultivating forgiveness and trust in post-conflict societies, even among younger generations who do not have living memory of the conflict.

When I began working on post-conflict societies, I took a very cognitive and rational approach to understanding reconciliation (speaking from a psychological perspective here, not legal, political, or historical). I started from the assumption that we need to change how we think about each other, the war, and the conflict, to change narratives or agree on a common narrative. I thought, "If only we tell people what happened and if only they accept it, we will be fine."

Then, when I started actually conducting research with people, I realised how strong and prominent emotions are, and the extent to which they determine how people in these divided communities behave and think. I realised that emotions are a problem. In this case we are talking about negative emotions: fear, hatred, guilt, anger. They take over everything we attempt to do, and they colour our behaviours, but they're also the solution. It's not a cognitive, rational process; it's very much an emotional process. What we need to do is find ways to transform these negative emotions and generate more positive feelings: about the self, about the home group, about the other group, about the past, and about the future.

It's not just that "we need to love each other" and then the story ends. We need to come to terms with the past, and the wrongs done by our own group. I cannot be angry every time you bring up an atrocity committed by my group. Because if I'm angry, I'll be defensive, and this creates further conflict. So the creation of positive emotional responses towards a whole range of issues must be embedded in the reconciliation process.

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To introduce new information, to have a discussion in which we can agree to disagree: even to get to that point requires some degree of openness and trust. They cannot be afraid of me, or the other. Because if people are closed off, we can't reach out to them to intervene.

The question then becomes: how can we design forms of contact that will actually either transform and regulate negative emotions or create positive emotions? The moral exemplar intervention has proven effective in a range of different contexts. So the question is not whether it works, but why it works. The answer appears to be emotional: the stories that they hear induce a sense of moral awe, of inspiration, and of admiration. Kids are just blown away by these stories, and they create this positive, calming emotional backdrop that then opens up a psychological space for everything else to start to evolve.

What is the role of non-formal education in contrast to more formal education?

In general, non-formal education in relation to peacebuilding and repairing relations plays an important role in Bosnia-Herzegovina, particularly because formal education is doing so little, or sometimes even making the situation worse. These initiatives should continue and must be supported and funded. Having said that, not all of the initiatives being implemented and funded are bringing about change on the ground. There are limitations to how much they can do. The question of how to build a peaceful society together cannot be left in the hands of a few motivated individuals or a few great organisations. This must be the responsibility of our institutions, which have greater permanence and durability and should be independent of individual conflicts and schemes. That goes not just for Bosnia, but for all post-conflict societies.

Although political change seems unlikely in the short term, do you see any evidence of a shift in the identities of children and young people as a result of greater contact with others, maybe through social media or travel?

Honestly, I don't know. Part of the new generation is open-minded, inclusive, and progressive in so many ways. At the same time, another part is more prejudiced and intolerant than their parents' generation. It's not an either/or situation.

The problem is that it seems to be precisely those who are more open-minded and progressive, and often more educated, who are choosing to leave the country. We are witnessing a flux of people leaving, a huge brain drain. I fear that this could have a real impact on society over the next decade. If you ask me about the future, I feel it could go in any direction.
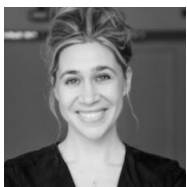
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