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### **The American-Bosnian Collaboration (ABC) Project**

The American-Bosnian Collaboration (ABC) Project, founded 25 years ago in Zenica, now operating in Sarajevo, is based on practical approaches to peace pedagogy in an informal educational setting. One of the project's founders, Professor Larisa Kasumagić Kafedžić, was a sophomore student at the University of Sarajevo in 1997 when she was invited to participate in a course at William & Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia on the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. She was also asked to incorporate her own reflections on behalf of the Balkan region, where she shared her plan to combine the work of an NGO she was involved in at the time with local efforts to support children in Zenica affected by the war.

“The idea for the project that I [originally] designed and created was to do peace-building and nonviolent communication with the learning of the English language...in my hometown of Zenica,” Professor Kasumagić said. A year later, in 1998, the very first group of students from William & Mary arrived in Zenica and, in 1999, the project was fully established with local students and American teachers from Williamsburg. “My early connection to the project was as a student, and the idea was for the project to be student-led; and it was like that for several years until 2002...when [it was] jointly decided...to move the project to Sarajevo and to have the students from the University of Sarajevo, from the teacher education program, participate in the project,” Professor Kasumagić said.

Now an academic coordinator, Professor Kasumagić works closely with Professor Paula Pickering, professor of government at William & Mary (W&M), on programming, recruiting, and mentoring students in preparation for the project. Professor Pickering, whose primary role is to prepare W&M students for international communication and pedagogical approaches, came to Williamsburg in 2001, researching post-conflict reconstruction of political and social institutions. “It’s extremely important to work in partnership and not for us to impose our ideas on another culture...it’s important to talk about the approach, really, that I found through my own research—through 25 years, about [supporting] the development of [the] skills that help

post-conflict communities build peace,” Professor Pickering shared. When asked about her motivations for becoming an integral part of this collaboration, Professor Pickering responded that “having [this] opportunity to help support something where we have evidence that our [Bosnian] partnership is making a difference for young people here, in Bosnia, is really motivating for me.”

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In Sarajevo, the ABC Project works with local NGO Creativus and Vladislav Skarić Elementary School to bring together four Bosnian co-teachers from the University of Sarajevo and four American co-teachers from W&M every summer. Together, the co-teachers work to formulate lesson plans that best explore the impact of a chosen topic on students’ intercultural competency (ICC) skills, encouraging them to share those skills with their families and peers during the formal school year. This year, the topic of focus was environmental stewardship and its role in growing the ICC skills of students of varying age groups throughout a three-week period in July. As a visiting student from Cornell University working with the Peace Education Hub, which Professor Kasumagić also coordinates, I had the pleasure of interviewing the co-teachers to learn about their roles, motivations, and experiences in their respective classrooms. As a result of my interview process, I chose to let their stories depict what makes this collaborative project unique.

Nermin Kurtić, one of four Bosnian co-teachers from the University of Sarajevo, shared his personal definition of peace along with an example of an activity that his group of students, aged 10-11 years old, engaged in. “My role is to make the kids more comfortable with being out in the environment and teach them how we can care for [it], what [it] does for us, and the interconnectedness of everything in the environment. . . Just because something is different, [it] doesn’t mean we can’t achieve peace based on that,” he said. This summer, Nermin and his group of students frequently visited a local park, learning about everything in it and the harmony achieved through the interdependence and cooperation of all the park’s components, including the students themselves. Such activities are critical to decenter ourselves from the environment, acknowledging that we are only *components* of it that should play a role in maintaining its harmonious and repetitive cycle of existence.

Falan Kifle, a co-teacher from W&M, who described her role as a conversation facilitator, shared that her favorite part of the project was “having [her] expectations exceeded

every time [she entered] the classroom.” Falan shared that there were several times during class when she and her co-teacher Ernad Mahmić substituted “activities for discussion because [the students were] so passionate about the [peace] topics.” Falan realized that explicitly addressing peace topics in the classroom with the proximal approach encouraged students to openly talk about such topics compared to the distal approach that skimmed through peace topics within an already existing curriculum. Before the pandemic, the project would run for four-week-long sessions rather than three; it is possible that, with an additional week added back into the informal curriculum, it would mitigate some of the challenges of a shortened session.

A critical component of the ABC Project, which Falan uplifts in her response, is the process of reflection for the students and self-reflection amongst the co-teachers. At the end of every week, the team would gather to share stories and suggestions, building a system of constructive feedback and constant support that transcends class time and all three weeks of the summer session. Aashni Jain, another co-teacher from W&M, was asked to reflect on the differences between her home institution—a formal institution—and the ABC Project—an informal learning initiative. “The focus on values [here] is pretty important...in college curriculums, it’s a rarity to see the curriculum itself center on values rather than subject matter, even if it’s [a] specific class” Aashni shared. “[It’s] not about the emotional depth you gain from it,” Aashni emphasized, describing the traditional liberal arts curriculum in the United States, which she feels focuses more closely on skills of memorization that the ABC Project directly challenges.

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The gaps between informal and formal educational settings are stark, and are especially so in terms of what makes a positive peace-oriented curriculum. Falan’s co-teacher, Ernad, another Bosnian co-teacher from the University of Sarajevo, was asked to reflect on the accessibility of peace, and what that means within the context of the ABC Project. “If you don’t have certain basic needs met or if you don’t have certain parts of your personality figured out...you aren’t ready to talk about peace and you don’t really care about it,” Ernad expressed. “...What often isn’t discussed, is thinking about peace for some people can almost be a privilege rather than something that’s a matter-of-fact thing.” Here, Ernad underlines the importance of incorporating peace pedagogy on a larger scale to make it accessible and more widely distributed across communities and cross-cultural settings.

“In the Bosnian context, if somebody grew up in a family that didn’t [necessarily] care that much...about peace education [or] had their own narratives about what happened in the war...the ABC project provides a space for these topics [to be] addressed not only in theory...[but] in a practical way [that] encourages the kids heavily to cooperate with each other [and] to model peaceful communication,” Ernad described. With Falan, Ernad co-taught the oldest group of students aged 14-15, who, in Bosnia-Herzegovina will soon begin their secondary education, equivalent to high school education in the United States. Simulating peace discussions over the summer, as ABC does, opens the possibility of the same students raising relevant topics and questions in their secondary school classrooms.

Emina Zubača, a Bosnian co-teacher that worked alongside Aashni, helped facilitate activities and discussions within the youngest group of students. As a third-year undergraduate at the University of Sarajevo, Emina shared the motivation behind her involvement with ABC as being driven by her interest in education and the challenges of being involved in the field. “I never knew if I was fit for the role of an educator because there are so many issues and challenges that might come with that...I think it’s a very noble [calling], and I mean that [because] it comes with a lot of responsibility and I, essentially, wanted to see if I can handle that much responsibility,” Emina expressed. A valuable aspect of the ABC Project that Emina brings to the forefront is the skills training that it provides for all of the co-teachers—skills and peace-oriented values they can apply in other work or non-work settings.

When asked about her visions for the future of the collaboration, Emina shared that “...what’s most rewarding about *this* is just seeing the progress in...the individual kids...if not the whole group, because we are dealing with kids who are 9, 10 years old, [and] we are introducing them to some extremely complicated concepts.” Emina then goes on to say that “...what [she’s] hoping this project will [continue to] achieve in the future [are] those small victories, if not some grand results in the field of education.” For informal learning programs, making any immediate impacts in formal educational spaces takes time. As an ongoing project of 25 years, ABC has undergone several changes and, by introducing new themes each summer, explores peace topics through different lenses and mediums, such as theatrical performance.

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What makes this program special is not only the variety of personal backgrounds through which intercultural communication occurs, but the individualized understandings of peace that

all lead to a unifying concept: collaboration. John Babbitts, an American co-teacher from W&M, also shared his interpretation of peaceful communication and how the ABC Project has reinforced that. “As humans, we’re imperfect and the best thing for us to do is to find some sort of compromise...where everyone gets along [or] everyone feels represented...but, [peace is] a temporary thing. We try to make it as permanent...as we possibly can, but, over time, circumstances change and people change and so, the idea of maintaining peace is trying to [demonstrate]—as a part of this project, nonviolent communication...[which] helps us to maintain peace,” John explained.

As John emphasizes, peace can be fleeting; however, its temporary nature does not mean that the skills we utilize to tap back into it are, too. Through simulations, intergroup dialogue, and constant reinforcement of peaceful pedagogical approaches in the classroom, the ABC team had another successful summer, building meaningful relationships with their students and with each other. Nancy O’Gara, Nermin’s American co-teacher, thoughtfully shared her experience as a co-teacher and American student visiting and engaging with a new community. “I think the most valuable piece [has been] that exchange of ideas, which was not forced and very natural,” Nancy responded. She went on to describe that “the most valuable part of the program, generally, has been giving these kids an opportunity to learn...have fun...make new friends and experience the type of education that they haven’t before, both in subject and in style,” Nancy explained.

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As the collaborative project continues expanding to involve other institutions and local organizations that spark new initiatives and provide support, there is hope that the ABC peace values will find their way into communities within Bosnia-Herzegovina, itself. “We think through the changes we would like to introduce and, every year, we [want] to expand it further...to other communities in Bosnia to bring in other...ethnic groups,” shared Professor Kasumagić. Unfortunately, as Professor Kasumagić goes on to share, funding for the program remains the biggest issue, especially to ensure W&M students are able to engage in the initiative. “Introducing more students into the project...would require additional [involvement] from the institution...As [the] Peace Hub, we would always welcome development because the needs are there—even to go to a different community in Bosnia [where] access to education [and] to resources is far lesser than [in] Sarajevo,” explained Professor Kasumagić.

When discussing the expansion of the ABC Project, it is critical to be mindful of its stakeholders. There must remain a large emphasis on *support* and *receptiveness to learning* for those newly becoming a collaborative component of this initiative, such as myself. “[Ask] a lot of questions and [be] very open-minded about saying ‘Yes’ to new experiences and understanding this whole project as [an active] learning experience,” Nancy said, sharing her advice for future W&M students coming to Sarajevo next summer. As an observer and research collaborator, my advice to future Cornellians, co-teachers, and students partaking in this project is to be prepared to transform your thinking, lifestyle, and relationships to yourself and others. “Learning” peace is not a simple task; consistent and mindful exposure to its implications on various areas of your life is the only way to ensure its longevity.