

## Chapter Three

# Bosnia and Herzegovina — Sarajevo: Radmila Rangelov-Jusović's Story

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been identified as the most brutal conflict in Europe since World War II. Between 1992 and 1995 hundreds of thousands of people were caught up in the ensuing terror. The focus on “ethnic cleansing” led whole communities to be displaced or destroyed. Many people were incarcerated in concentration camps, tortured, and/or exterminated without due process of law. Sarajevo, and some other cities, were subject to daily bombings and sniper fire. Families in a number of remote villages and towns were subject to genocide.

The Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step was established at the end of the war to promote democratic changes in the education system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It has focused on creating safe spaces for children to develop and learn and for parents and educators to come together. Through its diverse training programs, the Center is playing an

important role in helping to re-establish confidence and trust among local communities and thus build peace.

In this chapter Radmila Rangelov-Jusović tells the story of the development of the Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step, the challenges it has faced, and the lessons learned from this. Radmila is the Executive Director of the Center. She was born in Sarajevo and grew up in a multiethnic and multireligious community typical in Bosnia during that time. Radmila's family mirrored this diversity: her father Bulgarian; her mother Serbian; her husband Muslim. During the war, Radmila's home was under siege. A bomb killed her father and severely wounded her mother, who died some years later. Her brother, his family, and many other close friends emigrated. Radmila chose to stay and work to help rebuild her country.

## Bosnia y Herzegovina — Sarajevo: La historia de Radmila Rangelov-Jusović

Radmila Rangelov Jusović nació en Sarajevo y creció en una comunidad multiétnica y pluri-religiosa típica de Bosnia en aquella época. La familia de Radmila era un reflejo de esta diversidad: su padre era búlgaro, su madre serbia, y su esposo musulmán.

Durante la guerra el hogar de Radmila estuvo bajo el fuego. Una bomba mató a su padre e hirió severamente a su madre, quien murió algunos años después. Su hermano, su familia y muchos amigos cercanos emigraron. Radmila eligió quedarse y ayudar a reconstruir su país. Ella es ahora Directora Ejecutiva de una ONG local independiente: el Centro de Innovaciones Educativas Paso a Paso, establecido para promover cambios democráticos en el sistema educativo de Bosnia y Herzegovina.

## The conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the six republics of the former Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with a population of approximately four million people and a long history of multiethnic and multireligious tradition. There are three primary ethnic groups in the region: Bosnian Muslims or Bosniacs (43 percent); Bosnian Serbs (31 percent), and Bosnian Croats (17 percent). Other groups from the area include Jews, Roma, and Albanians.

In 1992 three states of the former Yugoslavia declared independence: Slovenia; Croatia; and in March 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, war in Bosnia started. Hundreds of thousands of people were caught up in the ensuing terror. Whole communities were displaced or destroyed. Huge numbers of people (majority non-Serbs) were incarcerated in concentration camps, tortured, and/or exterminated without due process of law. Sarajevo, and some other cities, were subject to daily bombings and sniper fire. Families in a number of remote villages and towns were subject to genocide.

The International Criminal Tribunal has estimated that, across the country, victims of the war include over 55,000 civilians and over 47,000 soldiers. Moreover, it is estimated that over 20,000 women and girls are reported to have been raped. Massacres of whole villages have been reported. In one small, UN-protected area of Srebrenica, more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims are reported to have been murdered. More than one million people were internally displaced and a further one million people became refugees in other countries. Within this, children account for more than 16,000 of those killed. In addition, over 34,000 children were severely wounded and more than 600,000 are estimated to be internally displaced; thousands more are living in refugee camps beyond the borders.

The war ended politically with the *Dayton Peace Agreement* signed in December 1995. Under the terms

of this agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina consist of two autonomous entities based on ethnicity. The first, Republika Srpska, covers 49 percent of the territory and represents a majority of ethnic Serbs. The remaining 51 percent became the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and consists of ten administrative units each with its own legislature, executive, and judiciary branches (cantons). Each canton is populated by a majority of Bosniacs and/or Croats and has its own unique governmental structure, including individual Ministries of Education (13 in total). In order to make national policy, all 13 Ministries need to work in accord.

## The effect of the conflict on children, families, and communities

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been identified as the most brutal conflict in Europe since World War II. Every community has been affected. For years the basic essentials of survival — water and food — were scarce. There was no possibility of movement or travel. People remained hidden in their houses or in shelters. Since the war, the country remains covered with land mines. Some areas of the country remain “ethnically clean.” Thousands of survivors reported that they could not face returning to villages where violence, rape, and killings had taken place. But in the end, many did return. As of September 2006, about one-half of the two million displaced are living in their home villages. However, finding the courage to return to a destroyed landscape and infrastructure is only one of many obstacles to overcome. There are limited or no jobs in the devastated environment to return to. As a result, more than 20 percent of people in Bosnia and Herzegovina currently live below the poverty line.

Children were victims of the war in myriad ways. Children lived under constant threat of violent death, either of themselves or of family members. Thousands of children were confined in basements or other enclosures. If not directly injured or killed,

children became witnesses to the killing or rape of family members. Thousands became orphans, living in deep poverty. There was no consistent strategy for providing help to children. Children with physical injuries could not access proper medical care. The psychological needs of children who were variously traumatised, displaced, and/or injured were not addressed in any systemic way.

## Post-war preschool and education services

At the end of the war the country remained with its original borders intact — but with a destroyed infrastructure, a destabilised economy, and a citizenry full of fear and mistrust. More than half of all the schools in the country were destroyed or became refugee camps, hospitals, and military facilities. To this day, the government has not returned all the preschools and schools that were seized for other purposes during the war, nor have they rebuilt the many school buildings that were destroyed.

One outcome of the conflict has been the establishment of three separate departments of education, with three separate curricula, standards, and programs (Serb, Croat, and Bosnian). Huge diversities exist in perspective, curriculum, and content provided by each system. For example the textbooks from different areas of the country present differing (often biased) geographical and historical facts related to the war. In the communities where one nationality is predominant, children are not taught about other national ethnicities. In areas where Croats and Bosniacs live in the same communities, the phenomenon of “two schools under one roof” has emerged. Children are educated in the same buildings, but each ethnic group attends in separate shifts. The children never mix socially and are not given opportunities to communicate with each other or even walk on the same side of the street.

The right of children to be educated in their mother tongue (cited in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the*

*Child*) is used by politicians to support ethnic segregation in schools. This means that the limited resources allocated for education need to be spent on publishing textbooks in three languages (Bosnian, Serbian, and Croat). Prior to the war most children had fluency in all three languages from an early age.

## Building trust relationships through early childhood education

A number of humanitarian aid agencies invested in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the war. Post-trauma and peace making programs were quickly set up, but the urgency of the situation and the perceived need for a quick response resulted in programs that were not always informed by situation analyses, or by local input. Many of the immediate post-war programs thus did not include a plan for systemic and sustainable development. It was within this climate that the *Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step* developed.

The mission of the Center was, and still is, to provide quality education for all children. We are privileged in accessing stable funding sources which allows for a long-term vision. This gave us the opportunity to incorporate the building of trusting relationships as a critical component of educational planning and delivery. Trust needed to be rebuilt between teachers who now found themselves addressing ethnically different goals, and trust needed to be rebuilt with families and children who had learned to be suspicious and fearful of activities outside of the house. We needed to establish a new way of delivering preschool and educational services. We knew that community consultation and input would be the cornerstone of our success. Our efforts had to reflect trust of local expertise and build incrementally on local capacity.

Our first phase for reconstruction and development of the educational system concentrated on repairing

buildings where preschools could be housed. This concrete act gave hope to communities. The buildings represented a commitment to permanence and stability within communities. The next phase was more complex. We needed to turn the physical classrooms into meeting places where all participants — children, families, and staff — felt welcomed, respected, and safe. This meant facilitating some radical changes in teaching attitudes and methods, including the notion that parents participate in classroom activities.

In our reconstructed system, teaching methods and curricula would be directed at promoting democracy within classrooms and hopefully beyond. Preschools and school would model respect for children's rights, freedom of speech and religion, and would teach children to think critically, make responsible choices and decisions, express themselves freely, and learn how to resolve conflict resolution in positive ways.

## Working with and building the capacity of early childhood educators

Early childhood educators, like all citizens, had suffered during the war and needed to address their own physical and psycho-social needs. They, like so many, may have been unable to carry out their duties during the war and may have lost self-confidence along with the trust of the community. Most importantly, teachers needed to be models for forgiveness; to transcend their own biases and to reflect a positive outlook for the children in their charge. Educators also needed support in issues such as conflict resolution, problem solving, and respecting diversity.

In addition, early childhood educators in Bosnia and Herzegovina were unlikely to have had training in early childhood education. They were used to traditional didactic teaching methods. Thus, besides dealing with the needs of a reconstructed society,

teachers needed to feel comfortable working in a child-centered, integrated environment which called on significant parent involvement. Teachers also were expected to model problem solving techniques, teamwork, and respect for diversities.

This demanded huge change and placed a significant responsibility on the shoulders of early childhood teachers. Our first activity, therefore, was to call a national seminar for all appropriate teaching staff to begin the process of capacity building and forging support networks. Thus, only one year after the war, while the wounds were still fresh, we brought preschool teachers from different parts of the country and different nationalities together. I have to admit we took a risk here. The teachers came from warring factions. Besides needing to transcend their own differences, they also needed to learn how to work with parents in new inclusive ways and to challenge their own beliefs about how to teach young children. They needed to move from purveyors of information and knowledge to becoming facilitators of learning processes. It was going to be a huge jump for some — but in the end, the teachers embraced these activities and more!

An important component of the ultimate success of the teacher-training program was the opportunity for interactions and networking. The teachers, forced to spend time together during long breaks and evening events, got to know each other as individuals and to note their similarities as well as their differences. While we covered content based on child-centered learning, and while this was new and fascinating to some, it was the process more than the product which underlay our success.

We modeled participation in all ways. Learning took place through formal and informal discussion groups and the opportunity to share experiences and concerns. Teachers needed to regain their confidence by being treated as competent professionals; being listened to and being also supported to address issues in a way that was comfortable for them. Most of all it was important that they were seen as equal partners in determining the goals and focus of the training

situation. This is the way we hoped the teachers would deal with their own constituency of parents and children.

Allowing participants to drive the training called for a great deal of flexibility on our part, including some radical changes in our original plans and refocusing on how to invest received funds. (Flexible donors are critical to success!) Often we found ourselves dealing with issues which were not obviously connected to promoting quality education systems, but were important to the teachers and, therefore, justifiable under our mandate.

In subsequent years we developed and presented a number of diverse training programs for all stakeholders. (See Boxes 3.1 and 3.2 for a sample of our programs.) While many training opportunities were presented, teachers reported that the most valued activity was the networking and the sharing of knowledge and experience amongst the groups. Many teachers visited each other in different cantons to share experiences and ideas. Through word of mouth, the trainings became hugely popular. When our funds were short, teachers found ways to raise money themselves and/or would spend several weeks' salary to attend.

## Working with parents

One common outcome of war is that the trust between children and adults is often destroyed. Parents may disappear, causing children to feel deserted, neglected, and betrayed. Even when parents remain with the family during war situations, they often lose their ability to act as a source of protection or as the provider of basic needs. Because of this, a critically urgent task in post-conflict situations is to provide support for families to reunite and stabilize their relationships with their children.

Parents benefit from understanding how trauma may affect young children and from learning strategies to deal with this. Also, by facilitating healing for their children, parents themselves may actually be working

through their own psychosocial issues. In our program we worked hard to secure home /centre relationships. Parents, often traumatized themselves, needed to be given many ways in which they could participate. We worked with the educators to help them see the benefits of inviting parents to participate in classroom activities, to attend workshops and even, when possible, to work as salaried teacher's assistants.

## The development of appropriate indicators for measuring success

Our mandate in establishing new preschools included a focus on measurable indicators and practice guidelines for use in early childhood settings. This need for accountability was new to us but became a basis for close collaboration with teachers. While conscious of the need to incorporate international standards for early childhood education, we were nonetheless committed to adapting any established programs to meet our specific needs. Early childhood educators, teachers, and representatives from educational authorities worked together to identify the main foci for the curriculum and for "best teaching practice" in light of individual situations (standards). While the implementation of an accountability dimension could seem threatening, the new approach was actually embraced by teachers who reported feelings of ownership and enhanced understanding of the goals and anticipated outcomes of their work.

These collaboratively developed standards remain the only quality standards in our country and continue to provide guidance for many other teachers who want to improve their practice. (See [www.coi-stepbystep.ba/eng/standardi.html](http://www.coi-stepbystep.ba/eng/standardi.html)). Alongside the development of standards we also initiated a certification process for early childhood teachers. This involved the development of a group of certifiers who were trained specifically for

## Box 3.1 Education for Social Justice training program

The *Education for Social Justice* program run by Step by Step facilitates the self-examination of attitudes toward diversity. Community members, health and social workers, teachers, and minority representatives engage in open dialogue and develop common ways to improve the life of every citizen in their community without judgment or accusation.

One such program focused on addressing the widespread discrimination against Roma children. It involved regional educational authorities, municipality, social services, health providers, school representatives, civil society (mostly Roma NGOs), and community members in developing a long-term strategy.

The process began with a meeting whereby stakeholders came together and had an opportunity to address their own biases. The next step was to investigate and hear stories about systemic oppression. The group then goes through a series of exercises to develop practical, step-by-step strategies

for dealing with the issues raised — including how to ensure that teachers and parents participate in solution-oriented programs for social justice.

One way to ensure commitment from the communities themselves was to provide only partial funding for the program. This means that the community needs to raise some funding. In the process of applying for local funds, the participants will be ensuring that goals and outcomes are stated in terms of local community needs.

As one of the participants explained:

“I became aware of my own prejudice and got the tools for an active fight against discrimination. I felt, at least for a moment, what discrimination, oppression, and aggression meant. I learned about the language of observation, language of interpretation, and the effects of labeling. Most importantly I learned that I do not want to be part of a ‘silent majority.’ It is hard to act, but possible. The worst thing is to not do anything!”

mentoring and undertaking the certification process. We did whatever we could to enhance the visibility of our newly trained teachers. This served the double goal of rewarding and motivating the teachers and also served to renew community respect for and trust in the education system. Thus we did not simply provide a “paper certificate” but rather a process which involved teacher-to-teacher support and the creation of a network of role models who were ready to experiment with new skills and competencies.

Nonetheless, since our program did not extend to all schools, some divisions appeared. Those who were not involved and were used to more traditional ways of working with children and families became suspicious of the new approach. The Step by Step teachers were criticized for “too much work for

nothing,” “experimenting,” and “not exercising discipline in the classroom.” This was addressed in two ways. First, the network of teachers with shared values and goals supported and sustained the trained population. Group meetings were arranged as often as possible as a way to re-energize and re-motivate teachers who were feeling “attacked” by their non-participating peers.

Second, our attention to measurable indicators provided justification for our methods. As time passed, the obvious benefits for the children and some international recognition allowed us to expand throughout the country. Original participating teachers became mentors and trainers to new recruits into the program. This raised their status in their communities and beyond.

## Box 3.2 Parenting with Confidence program

The *Parenting with Confidence* program run by Step by Step aims to provide parents with information and strategies to work with their own children in lieu of preschool participation. The program involves the facilitation of peer support groups. Materials and workshops are included as a way to keep parents motivated. Topics include positive interactions with children, appropriate guidance techniques, building children's self-confidence, positive communication, and creating opportunities for children to develop literacy and numeracy skills within a relaxed home environment. Resources such as books and toys are provided.

The program is delivered by teachers within the community who have been given special training for this purpose. Space for meetings is usually arranged within schools or preschools. Often the parents (who tend to come from marginalized and disadvantaged populations) bring their children with them to the

"classes." This gives us an opportunity to undertake some pseudo preschool activities which the parents can observe and replicate at home. The program has been extremely popular and we are pleased to see that fathers are also taking part.

The confidence this gave parents is evident in some of the testimonies they provided:

"I was so afraid about my child starting the school. Now it is easier because the teacher told me that she doesn't have to know all the letters and numbers . . . and it's OK to color across the line. . . ."

"I realized that every child needs a time to learn. It takes time. . . ."

"Now I know how play is important, that a child is learning numbers and letters through play."

## Box 3.3 Encouraging relationships with parents: The Children's Museum

One of our most successful activities for home and center collaboration was the development within our classrooms of a *Children's Museum*. This involved a contribution by each family for the collection of an item that should reflect some aspect of family life (baby pictures, clothes, something from a previous village) which the child and parent present to the class — including designing activities around their

item. The parent and child would answer questions about the item and then, ceremoniously, donate it to the museum. This activity allowed children and parents to talk about positive aspects of their past in a safe and supportive environment and provided the means for families to reconstruct a history based on pride and positive feelings.

Our program started in seven kindergartens. Today, professional development is available to every teacher in every village of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instead of training the Step by Step teachers ourselves, we evolved into trainers of trainers. Currently, we have a network of 120 certified trainers who work with more than 1,000 teachers a year in local communities.

## Lessons learned

In retrospect, our success lay in many things including providing a long-term vision for the future, remaining apolitical, and treating everyone equally without judgment. However, it mostly lay in simply listening and being willing to adapt processes to the needs of the local population. There are three key lessons we have learned from our experience to date:

### *Local ownership is vital*

We believe that a big part of our success lies in our commitment to including all voices as we approached the development of new ideas and new programs. Sustainable change has come about through shared vision, values, beliefs, and ownership. We are convinced that the best programs in the world will not take hold without some adjustment to local needs, attitudes, and capacities. My advice is to: remain open and flexible; practice listening to all stakeholders; and allow for the time to implement change in incremental stages.

### *Change is based on developing trust relationships*

The physical development of preschool spaces came to represent a metaphor for feelings of safety. Here all stakeholders could feel welcomed, comfortable, and could participate equally. Trust developed because we truly respected the commitment, experience, knowledge, and capacities of parents, teachers, and children. The time and effort taken to develop these safe and trusting spaces was well worth it. Only from this position could the overarching goals for educational and social change that we had set for ourselves be achieved.

## Box 3.4 Views on the Step by Step programs

“Kindergartens and schools were the only facilities in communities and we tried to use them as a meeting place where life can begin to recover.”  
*Early childhood teacher at training session*

“Teachers and parents, when organized and supported, are always the biggest and strongest force for peace and reconciliation. They are also an extremely, very sensitive, and critical audience.”  
*Trainer in Step by Step program*

### *Co-opting diverse stakeholders will ensure sustained outcomes*

Our strategy from the start was to collaborate with all of our stakeholders. This included the local governments of all 10 cantons, Republika Srpska, and District Brcko. We developed long-term partnerships with the 12 Ministries of Education (13 including the Federal Ministry). We included officially appointed representatives of all the Ministries as project coordinators. They became part of writing project proposals, standards development, and they participated in the trainings. It took several years of involvement to build up feelings of ownership. Today they have become advocates for changes within the system in every area.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a long way to go to heal from the devastation of war. The children in our centres are still facing life within a deeply divided society. There are wounds which will take generations to heal. And yet, the success of the Step by Step project gives up hope. Teachers are feeling empowered. Parents are feeling included. Children are developing awareness of how to live and work and play in settings which are participatory and equitable. It is a first step.