



'Individually Tailored, Collectively Constructed': Non-Formal Peace Education in Kosovo

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MSc in Education (Comparative and International), 2024

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation is a qualitative study using student focus groups, staff semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to answer the following question: In Kosovo’s context of a formally divided education system, what role do non-formal peace education programs play in shaping youth perceptions of peace and agency? Kosovo offers a unique case study as it is a post-conflict society with an ethnically stratified education system that receives little government support for instituting formal peace education initiatives. As a result, an integral need and research gap exists in understanding the role of non-formal peace education in facilitating Kosovo’s ongoing peacebuilding process amidst barriers existing in the formal environment. To respond to this need, the researcher examined the Hawley Youth Center’s (HYC) Student Exposure Program (SEP) as a case study of non-formal peace education in Kosovo by applying Monisha Bajaj’s (2019) four critical peace education competencies. The findings will demonstrate that non-formal critical peace education initiatives encourage youth to view peace and agency as objects of sensemaking. HYC develops this student mindset through an approach that is relevant to individual student experiences (‘individually tailored’) while collaborated on with others for a common purpose (‘collectively constructed’). This paper contributes to peace education literature by discussing how a sensemaking perspective facilitates pursuits for long-term, sustainable peace as youth are better prepared to face evolving challenges and unanticipated spoilers to the peace process. The researcher then recommends that further research be conducted to one, evaluate the development of sensemaking mindsets in other cases of non-formal peace education initiatives and two, explore how this perspective directly aids sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

**List of Abbreviations**

HYC	Hawley Youth Center
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SEP	Student Exposure Program
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNMIK	United Nations Mission in Kosovo

**‘Individually Tailored, Collectively Constructed’: Non-Formal Peace Education in Kosovo****Chapter One: Introduction**

This research study was inspired by my trip to Mitrovica, Kosovo. Mitrovica, an old mining town, is split by a river with Kosovar-Serbians occupying the northern half and Kosovar-Albanians occupying the southern half. Walking through the southern part, you see dilapidated buildings from the 1990s conflict contrasted by an ongoing abundance of reconstruction. The central pedestrian walkway is full of bustling cafés and bars with children darting across the street, often accompanied by a football. As one ventures closer to the bridge connecting the northern and southern half, the undertones of simmering conflict begin to emerge. Graffiti paints walls underscoring support for the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and demanding justice for loved ones missing since 1999. Statues of historical Albanian nationalists dot the main squares backed by red and black Albanian flags. Approaching the bridge, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops appear, guarding either side to intercept illegal smuggling. So few people regularly cross the bridge that, while allowed, it feels uncomfortable as you venture past. Whereas the southern half exhibits signs of rebuilding, the northern half appears frozen in time. Tattered Serbian flags line the streets, wind blows debris across your feet as you walk, and buildings appear abandoned. The pedestrian street symmetrical to the Kosovar-Albanian one is empty, only a few individuals occupy the café seating. Walls on this side are painted with Serbian revolutionaries harkening back to the legendary 1389 Field of Blackbirds battle against the Ottomans, a battle referenced in support of continuing fighting against the Kosovar-Albanians. While different in appearance and atmosphere, a shared tension exists on both sides: enmity over

past atrocities and frustration with political stagnation. How can a society approach reconciliation between two sides so firmly set in retaining physical and social separation?

Maria Montessori (1972), a twentieth century academic in peace education, wrote, “establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war” (p. viii). This quote demonstrates the centrality and critical importance of peace education, a field with more ambiguity to its make-up and purpose than clarity. Peace education has been accepted in most development organizations as an effective and transformative method towards post-conflict stabilization (Datzberger, 2017). Peace education is meant to foster cultures of peace and develop conflict resolution skills (Schultze-Kraft, 2022). However, researchers and practitioners also recognize that peace education’s capacity for building sustainable peace is equally matched by its capacity for creating “new forms of structural violence” (Datzberger, 2017, p. 327). Despite this recognition, many peace education initiatives operate under homogenized curriculums that do not account for context and replicate systemic tensions contributing to conflict (Novelli & Cardozo, 2008). Research by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) demonstrates that peace education ventures in post-conflict societies can only achieve a sustainable influence on the peace process if one, contextualized for the conflict’s history and societal landscape and two, conducive to youth empowerment (Van der Linden, 2015). These facets for effective peace education denote a need for exploring non-formal and formal peace education as they relate to context, youth agency, and ongoing peace processes.

This dissertation will begin by introducing Kosovo’s historical context. Next, this paper will use current literature to frame understandings of peace, explore the progression of critical peace education, and discuss the distinctions between formal and non-formal peace education in

relation to diverse case study contexts. I will demonstrate that a vital need exists for understanding the role of non-formal peace education in facilitating Kosovo’s unique peacebuilding process. Utilizing this background, I will introduce the theoretical and analytical frameworks centered around Monisha Bajaj’s (2019) four critical peace education competencies. Then the Hawley Youth Center (HYC) was used as a case study of non-formal peace education in Kosovo. Exploring their Student Exposure Program (SEP) specifically, this paper will be a qualitative study using student focus groups, staff semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. This project seeks to answer the following question: In Kosovo’s context of a formally divided education system, what role do non-formal peace education programs play in shaping youth perceptions of peace and agency? This research will propose that HYC’s non-formal peace education program, through the lens of critical peace education, shapes youth perceptions to see peace and agency as objects of sensemaking. Consequently, non-formal peace education is not artificially rooted in virtuously appellative sentiments but is rather grounded in a critical peace education process customized for individual realities yet collaborated on for shared vision. In other words, HYC’s non-formal program applies critical peace education through an ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach to facilitate a sensemaking view of peace and agency. This paper will conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for understanding the interconnections between peace education, youth agency, and facilitating sustainable peace.

## **Chapter Two: Kosovo’s Context and Education**

Before explaining Kosovo’s context, it is important to briefly clarify this paper’s terminology in referring to the country of Kosovo and its citizens. Kosovo declared

independence in 2008 but its status and associated terminology describing its geography and citizens is deliberated. The native language of this paper is English and will therefore apply the most widely applied English description for the territory: Kosovo (Sommers & Buckland, 2004). All citizens residing in this territory will be referred to as ‘Kosovar’ with a hyphenated form applied to denote ethnic groups as Kosovar-Serbian and Kosovar-Albanian (Salihu et al., 2019).

In 1989, following several decades of self-governance, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic withdrew Kosovo’s autonomy (Sommers & Buckland, 2004). He quickly instituted regulations aimed at subjugating the majority ethnic Albanian population to the minority ethnic Serbian population. As a part of his quest to re-institute a Serbian majority control of Kosovo, these regulations included removing ethnic Albanian students and teachers from all schools (Selenica, 2021). Consequently, the isolated Albanians formed a shadow government led by Ibrahim Rugova (Salihu et al., 2019). This shadow government instituted an underground school system providing for the education of at least 267,000 ethnic Albanian youth (Picciano & Elbasani, 2019). As a result, a parallel system of education emerged for ethnic Albanians and ethnic Serbians.

Tensions between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Serbians escalated in 1997 with the rise of the KLA in which the Albanians launched a forceful resistance movement against Serbian discrimination (Seybolt, 2007). The international community, concerned after the catastrophe of Bosnia, intervened to identify a diplomatic solution through peace talks in France (Covey et al., 2005). However, Milosevic rejected the proposed accords in February 1999 and gathered Serbian troops on the Kosovar border to definitively alter the ethnic composition of Kosovo through ethnic cleansing of the Albanians (Covey et al., 2005). In response, NATO initiated a bombing

campaign to force Milosevic to halt the violence and permitting time for the development of an international intervention led by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) (Salihu et al., 2019). This international mission quickly set out to provide security to quell reprisal violence by the Albanians against the Serbians, respond to the humanitarian crisis, lay the foundations for Kosovo’s independence, and normalize relations between the newly coined Kosovar-Albanians and Kosovar-Serbians (Currion, 2010).

As a part of this normalization of relations between Kosovar-Albanians and Kosovar-Serbians, UNMIK sought to abolish the formal parallel education system and reinstitute it under an ethnically unified scheme. However, several issues arose including security concerns, the separate nationalist agendas of the Kosovar-Albanians and Kosovar-Serbians, and the traumatic legacy of the conflict’s violence (Selenica, 2021). Such roadblocks also facilitated the development of separate Kosovar-Albanian municipalities and Kosovar-Serbian enclaves, with the Kosovar-Serbians possessing partial-autonomy over said enclaves (Salihu et al., 2019). As a result, the formal parallel education system still exists to this day with little government desire to alter the ethnic separation existing on either side (Salihu et al., 2019). The social implications for the sustainability of peace under this system are concerning. Today, over 70% of Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian youth have never engaged with someone of the opposite ethnicity (UNMIK, 2021). With the youngest population in Europe, Kosovo’s future for peace resides firmly in its younger generations with 53% of its citizens under the age of 25 (Sassi & Amighetti, 2018). The combination of a youth-based population and poor official institutional support for bridging ethnic separation means peace education pursuits lying outside formal educational and government control are incredibly important. These ‘non-formal’ initiatives, often led by local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), can facilitate a sustainable peace that counters the

historical narratives, social isolation, and youth disenfranchisement of the parallel education system in Kosovo.

### **Chapter Three: Literature Review**

#### ***Peace: A Complex Process***

To understand the purpose for, development of, and diverse contexts existing within peace education literature, it is first important to identify the different conceptualizations of peace. Traditional attempts to define peace focus on its relation to the presence or absence of war (Diehl, 2016). However, efforts have been made to expand definitions of peace outside the frame of warfare. Johan Galtung (1969) conceptualized the terms positive and negative peace. He explained peace as two-sided in which negative peace is the “absence of personal violence” and positive peace is the “absence of structural violence” (Galtung, 1969, p. 183). In other words, negative peace can be associated with the limiting of direct physical violence while positive peace can be associated with the limiting of indirect systemic inequalities.

These two definitions are critical for understanding the different dimensions of peace. However, current literature tends to prioritize studying negative peace over positive peace. This proclivity leaves a gap in exploring the relationship of peace to its sustainability and expansion rather than just its eradication of direct violence. Scholars have staked various claims to explain the decline of warfare including the lowering of violent behavior (Goldstein, 2011; Pinker, 2011), the expansion of democratic societies or democratic peace theory (Russett et al., 2001), the stability of borders or territorial peace theory (Gibler, 2012) and, market openness or capitalist peace theory (Schneider & Gleditsch, 2010). While these conceptions of peace as the absence of war bode well for those studying negative peace, it does little to provide a framework for

studying positive peace. Paul Diehl (2016) emphasized this distinction through an example of the status of peace on the Korean Peninsula. If peace is concentrated on as the absence of war, then North Korea and South Korea have been at peace since 1953 when all conventional military conflict ended leaving little need for continued peace efforts (Diehl, 2016). He further noted there is a problem with using this conception of peace when looking internally to States as it neglects critical elements considerate to human security, human rights, and ethnic/racial inequalities. Diehl’s (2016) critique is that there needs to be a broader research spread on peace unrelated to war to ensure that societies achieving a negative peace do not relapse into physical violence. The aim of peace research should not just be studying the “renewal of war but also the processes that can promote deep peacebuilding” (Diehl, 2016, p. 9).

In line with Diehl’s (2016) call, several contributions have been made that seek to expand positive peace literature. One major development is a move away from the idea that “peace is a certain condition, or situation, in a particular country at a certain moment in time” (Scholten, 2024, p. 6). Instead, authors have looked to reorient peace from an achieved state to an interconnected process existing within dynamic systems (Shinko, 2008). Peace as a process denotes that “conflicts do not necessarily need to be resolved for peace to occur, but rather that peace is about the way in which conflicts are handled” (Scholten, 2024, p. 7). Lisa Strömbom (2020) has emphasized this outlook most significantly with her operationalization of peace as a process as the transformation of violent conflict into political conflict where opponents are not seen as enemies but rather adversaries. With this view, structures are advocated to be put in place that facilitate conflict through nonviolent means between said adversaries. This focus on process has also led literature to concentrate on the sustainability of peace in which positive efforts

should not just respond to the resolution of conflict but also seek to prevent it (Gehrmann, 2021). As such, peace necessitates continual maintenance and adaptive restructuring.

Diehl and Strömbom’s (2016; 2020) points on viewing peace as a process and focusing on its sustainability are reflective of Galtung’s (1969) original intentions behind coining negative and positive peace. Galtung (1969) claimed that peace theory is not only tied closely to conflict studies but development studies too. As such, peace research will be equally connected to conflict research (negative peace) and development research (positive peace), with critical overlaps existing (Galtung, 1969). In other words, peace should be treated as pluralistic in which “different peacebuilders build different peaces” (Scholten, 2024, p. 9) but all contribute to the overall process. Researchers must identify how these diverse approaches to peace are interconnected, how they strengthen and reinforce one another, and how they address common goals (Jarstad et al., 2019). Positive peace is about sustainability- it is a continuous and intentional process.

This definition of peace as a process is important for understanding the sensemaking mindset that is discussed later in this paper. The fluidity of process allows individuals to contextualize peace as it relates to their experiences rather than as an obscure, faraway condition to be achieved. In this sense, peace is expanded from negative peace’s framework of simply ending direct violence. It is refocused within the auspices of positive peace’s facilitating structures for peace sustainability. This dissertation seeks to explore this interpretation of peace as a process as it relates to the positive peace promoting mechanism of education. The next section will discuss how literature has explored peace as an educational concept to be communicated to youth.

***Peace Education: A Conduit of Youth Agency***

Peace education’s inception as an academic field can be traced back to the early nineteenth century with its discipline gaining momentum post-World War II (Hantzopoulos & Williams, 2017). However, the conceptualization of peace as a topic for acquiring knowledge on can be traced much further back. Indigenous communities have distinct cultural practices that have passed on the tradition of nonviolent conflict resolution (Hantzopoulos & Williams, 2017). Relatedly, a majority of the world’s religions possess some form of writing or teaching on preserving peace (Harris & Morrison, 2003). Peace education arose in parallel to the major peace movements encompassing the world in response to the unprecedented violence of the World Wars, the class conflict of industrialization, and the emerging ethnic, racial, and religious tensions of decolonization (Harris and Morrison, 2003).

The most significant contributions to the field of peace education can be noted in John Dewey (1916), Maria Montessori (1949) and Paulo Freire (1970). John Dewey (1916) emphasized reflective learning in which education is a process where knowledge is garnered through practical experience that is negotiated with individual context. He saw this process as facilitating greater comprehension of the value of democracy and diverse perspectives (Holdo, 2023). He argued that this comprehension led to increased individual capacity to take action in the world and contribute to international collectivism (Holdo, 2023). Dewey (1916) saw learning as starting with problems identified through direct experience. These problems are not fixed but a continuous aspect of an individual’s exposures and associated reflections. In other words, to learn “is to construct as one discovers” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 32), thereby aiding youth in deconstructing their biases towards a problem.

While Dewey (1916) brought forth the importance of experiential learning, he neglected to address the relationship between teachers and students needed to develop this education form. Maria Montessori (1949) emphasized a student-driven approach to education where the teacher acted as a guide, not an enforcer. This relationship means the teacher may start the class with a general plan for the experiential learning, but this plan will be adapted as the students lead and require different knowledge applications (Marshall, 2017). Therefore, the learning pattern is an “individual, self-directed nature” (Marshall, 2017, p. 3) that is facilitated by the teacher but not directed. Montessori (1949) also emphasized a balance of independent agency for the individual student and interdependence on peers for collaboration. As such, where Dewey (1916) advocated for experiential learning, Montessori (1949) directed this learning to be applied via a student-teacher relationship focused on adaptation to student needs and experiences. However, a gap still existed in how these two educational elements relate to pursuits towards positive peace.

Dewey’s (1916) focus on experiential learning and Montessori’s (1949) realignment of the teacher-student relationship guided Paulo Freire’s (1970) refinement of these two elements to conceptualize an educational approach to peace known as critical peace education. In line with Montessori (1949), Freire (1970) saw a symbiotic relationship existing between teachers and students in constructing knowledge. Freire (1970) used the distinction between banking education and problem-posing education to demonstrate this concept. Banking education sees students as “objects of assistance” (Freire, 1970, p. 71) in which the teacher occupies a place of domination from which they deposit knowledge to the students as passive recipients. In contrast, problem-posing education emphasizes dialogue and makes students critical thinkers as their education relies on “the co-creation of knowledge through interaction, and a curriculum grounded in students’ interests and experiences” (Barlett, 2008, p. 2). Freire (1970) integrated

experiential learning into his critical peace education approach by introducing the cycle of praxis where there is an active flow of theory development, action implementation, and reflection upon said action to change the world around oneself. In summary, Freire’s critical peace education “empowers learners as transformative change agents” (Bajaj, 2019, p. 66) with practical roles and direct agency in peace processes.

While Freire (1970) has tied together Dewey (1916) and Montessori’s (1949) elements to develop a critical educational approach focused on pursuits towards peace, all three of their discussions failed to account for the type of educational institution or environment best suited for implementing critical peace education, if there is an ideal type. The next section will explore these different institution types and how they relate to different case study contexts.

### ***Educational Institutions: Formality Distinctions***

The pursuit of a contrast between formal and non-formal education began in the 1960s over concerns that the formal education systems were not adapting to meet society’s changing conditions (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Thus, interest developed in how learning gaps could be filled through another means- non-formal education (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Scholars have engaged in critical discussions on separating the definitions of formal and non-formal education and understanding their strengths and weaknesses. However, the debate over these definitions is not the central focus of this paper, but rather their conduciveness to applying critical peace education. For this reason, Philip Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed’s (1974) definitions will be applied as the most widely cited differentiations of formality in education.

Formal education is “the institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured... system, spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). Such environments are standardized for homogeneous

application of education priorities across a territory and focused on propositional knowledge over procedural knowledge (Jackson, 2023; Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Propositional knowledge is conceptual or a passing on of regurgitated facts (what is) while procedural knowledge is application-based or an understanding of how to utilize collected information (how to) (Rata, 2019).

In contrast, non-formal education is “any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system.” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). This setting is laid out to be self-directed in which the student’s passions and needs guide their learning (Jackson, 2023). These environments also typically emphasize procedural knowledge over propositional knowledge as they focus on providing practical information capable of being applied to a relevant context (Johnson & Majewska, 2022).

A variety of researchers have sought to apply these formal and non-formal distinctions to peace education. Terrance Carson and Elizabeth Lange (1997) differentiate formal and non-formal peace education through the terms integrative and additive respectively. They argue that the integrative or formal approach is most effective because it regularly exposes students to mental challenges meant to force them to critically reflect (Carson & Lange, 1997). Several researchers have applied this perspective to specific case studies. Maria Hantzopoulos (2011) explored the institutionalizing of critical peace education in formal public schools in New York City. She argued that formal education can serve as a conduit towards critical peace education for marginalized youth because it incorporates “intentional participatory spaces and...thematic, inquiry-based curriculum” (Hantzopoulos, 2011, p. 225) across all demographics evenly. This setting encourages democratic engagement and a commitment to societal transformation. However, her assessment fails to account for distinctions in the context of the formal education

system. If all national or regional demographics are attending the same school system on an equal basis, then this institutionalization of critical peace education may prove effective.

However, if a formal education institution is designed to represent and meet the needs of one group more than another, it can both disadvantage and disengage the excluded group from the critical peace education application (Jackson, 2023). In Kosovo’s case, its ethnically divided formal education system operates off a separately standardized curriculum for each ethnicity (Selenica, 2021). In this sense, it is difficult to apply a critical peace education approach evenly across all municipalities as the parallel system faces different academic requirements that are politicized by ethnic tensions.

Eleonora Emkic (2018) expanded this research on formal peace education to take place in a more ethnically stratified area- Bosnia and Herzegovina. The program case study, Education for Peace (EFP), began in the early 2000s and sought to create a unified global perspective amid youth to facilitate a culture of cohesion and peace between the dominate ethnic groups (Croatian, Bosnian, and Serbian) (Emkic, 2018). To institutionalize the peace education, the school system began by removing ethnically targeted or insulting context from the school curriculum and reconstructing manuals for teachers. The curriculum promoted emotional intelligence, creative thinking, and reflective practice (Emkic, 2018). However, another important distinction to be made in this context is the support of government structures. While Bosnia and Herzegovina has a multi-ethnic society split regionally like Kosovo, its formal peace education program receives extensive support from the government. The national government constructed an Education Reform Strategy (2002) to aid in the facilitation of the peace education curriculum (Emkic, 2018). For Kosovo, the parallel education system is managed separately by the Kosovar-Albanian government and the Kosovar-Serbian administrative enclaves with each resistant to the

restructuring of national narratives (Salihu et al., 2019). This government resistance makes institutionalizing formal peace education all but impossible.

Researchers have also studied the unique impact of non-formal peace education. The World Bank (2005) found that peace education attempts to integrate with formal curriculum have been less successful than those non-formal institutions that have focused time on peace education as an additive to traditional schooling. In addition, the World Bank (2005) identified that formal peace education initiatives forcing the integration of alienated minorities or the institution of new narratives had a limited probability for success. Gulkhanim Mammadova and Marina Danoyan (2022) discuss the role of non-formal peace education in Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Azerbaijan, a Conflict School exists in which, once a year, a series of after-school lectures, debates, and critical dialogues take place to educate youth on topics like peace theory, conflict studies, historical narratives, and peacebuilding strategies from the Karabakh Wars (Mammadova & Danoyan, 2022). The school embraces intersectionality in which sessions build upon one another to demonstrate overlaps in ethnic experiences/perspectives, peace processes, and conflict transformation policies (Mammadova & Danoyan, 2022). In this manner, the non-formal environment’s focus on procedural knowledge that students can apply stimulates critical thinking as they identify the overlaps existing between subject areas related to peace processes. For Kosovo, such an impact is very relevant. Formal concentrations on propositional knowledge can obstruct critical thinking over complex concepts. Disputed areas like ‘peace’ can be difficult to discuss in formal environments as they are linked to a student’s unique “past experiences, and resistant to change” (Johnson & Majewska, 2022, p. 12). Kosovo’s divided formal education system emphasizes propositional knowledge that leaves little room for critical discussion on the history and context behind ethnic relations in Kosovo (Selenica, 2021). This pattern perpetuates

damaging historical narratives thereby requiring a shift to non-formal education’s focus on procedural knowledge that encourages students to critically engage and apply material.

Tabea Pauli and Kiyomet Schipper (2018) broaden this concentration on procedural knowledge to include diversity in the participant and staff composition of the non-formal peace education environment. Using Myanmar as a case study, they explored the Kant Kaw Education Centre, an ethnically inclusive program committed to representing each of Myanmar’s seven main ethnicities (Pauli & Schipper, 2018). During this program, most students are interacting with other ethnicities and religions for the very first time. Through the program, they develop insights into diverse communities, reevaluate their prejudices and biases, and increase understanding between one another. The program curriculum concentrates on engaging the diverse cohort in “conflict analysis, peacebuilding theory and civic education” (Pauli & Schipper, 2018, p. 242). The students are required to connect global examples with their individual experiences and then use group work to synthesize their experiences with others (Pauli & Schipper, 2018). This self-directed nature of the non-formal program leads to authentic environments in which modern problems are situated in contexts applicable to the student (Jackson, 2023). Such personalized and contextualized learning makes abstract ideas like peace more tangible as students engage diverse perspectives through intentional discourse and connect this to previous understandings and views (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Again, this practice of non-formal education is relevant to Kosovo’s educational challenges. Each wing of Kosovo’s formal education system is designed for a single ethnicity so that even if a student wanted to join another ethnicity’s school they would most certainly be disadvantaged and disengaged (Selenica, 2021). Non-formal environments can bring students together outside of disputed formal environments and use self-directed learning to increase critical engagement between ethnicities.

As seen above, many researchers have studied and evaluated critical peace education in formal and non-formal settings. However, each of their contexts is incredibly distinct from Kosovo's. Bosnia and Myanmar offer the closest case studies in their possession of ethnically stratified regions with separate school systems. However, Bosnia possesses government support for its formal peace education initiatives and Myanmar's non-formal education takes place amid active conflict. In contrast, Kosovo is a post-conflict society in which very little government support exists in either the Kosovar-Albanian or Kosovar-Serbian regions for instituting formal peace education in the parallel education system (Salihu et al., 2019). Thus, a critical interest exists in understanding if and how non-formal critical peace education can be employed to narrow ethnic separation between youth in order to sustain and even accelerate youth agency in Kosovo's ongoing peacebuilding process. In this sense, there is a research gap to be met in identifying what impact non-formal critical peace education programs have on youth perceptions of peace and agency in Kosovo. Due to government resistance to formal peace education initiatives, non-formal peace education programs like HYC have risen to bring Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian youth together. Their design is meant to stymie the negative impacts of the ethnically divided formal education system by facilitating the positive impacts of non-formal education. Most significantly, this non-formal design seeks to provide youth with the tools to continue to develop their perspectives on peace and possess the confidence to feel a sense of agency in the peace process. It is the intention of this paper to explore how non-formal peace education initiatives like HYC shape youth perceptions towards peace and agency in Kosovo and thereby aid in facilitating sustainable peace efforts.

### ***Research Framework***

Based on the above discussion on peace education, critical peace education serves as my guiding theoretical framework for this paper as its approach seeks to not just shape student attitudes and beliefs towards peace but rather involve them in the peacebuilding process as “transformative change agents” (Bajaj, 2019, p. 66). While Freire (1970) generated critical peace education and its cyclical application of “theory, action, and reflection,” (p.33) Monisha Bajaj (2019) expanded this theory with four key analytical competencies. These competencies serve as the analytical framework for interpreting what impact non-formal peace education programs have on youth perspectives towards peace and agency. The competencies are critical thinking and analysis, conflict mapping, agency and social location, and participation and solidarity (Bajaj, 2019; 2015). The table below outlines the defining elements of each competency:

**Table 1**

*Critical Peace Education Competencies*

Critical Thinking and Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Breaking down narratives.</li> <li>-Analyzing the roots and impacts of forces of power.</li> <li>-Interrogating identity and citizenship forms.</li> </ul>
Conflict Mapping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Identifying the historical roots of a conflict and who benefits from the conflict.</li> <li>-Understanding the power relations and material inequalities contributing to the conflict.</li> </ul>
Agency and Social Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Recognizing possible forms of individual and collective agency.</li> <li>-Developing the necessary factors and strategies for sustained agency.</li> </ul>

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Participation and Solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Identifying possible and meaningful forms of participation.</li> <li>-Understanding how trauma may influence possible forms of participation.</li> <li>-Recognizing what solidarities are needed for advancing peace.</li> </ul>
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*Note.* Adapted from “Conceptualising Critical Peace Education for Conflict Settings,” by Bajaj, M., 2019, *Education and Conflict Review*, 2, p. 68; “Pedagogies of Resistance and Critical Peace Education Praxis,” by Bajaj, M., 2015, *Journal of Peace Education*, 12(2), p. 162.

As Bajaj (2015) notes, while all peace education programs must be adapted for local context and needs, orienting such programs towards these competencies offers a “concrete way of assessing efficacy and guiding learning processes” (p. 161) while also offering a “common language and vision” (p. 161) amongst researchers. In other words, this conceptualization of critical peace education can help researchers to isolate what program variables affect youth views on peace and agency. For this reason, this analytical framework serves as an excellent tool for examining the unique impact non-formal peace education programs may have on youth perceptions of the peace process and their agency within it. This framework was chosen over other popular approaches because it focuses on the skills the learner develops for understanding conflict and their role in the peace process. Other frameworks like Mario Novelli’s (2019) 4Rs of Redistribution, Reconciliation, Recognition, and Representation, are excellent for assessing ‘what’ students learn to understand conflict but not ‘how’ students develop this understanding towards peace and conflict. Thus, Bajaj’s framework was chosen to further insights into the aptitudes students build for viewing peace through critical peace education programs.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

### ***Research Aims***

As illustrated in the literature review, Kosovo offers a distinct case study as a post-conflict society possessing an ethnically separated education system. Furthermore, it faces no government support on either the Kosovar-Albanian or Kosovar Serbian sides towards implementing formal peace education endeavors. As such, an important gap exists for understanding the role of non-formal peace education in facilitating Kosovo’s ongoing peacebuilding process. In response, this dissertation examines non-formal peace education in Kosovo as a distinct unit of analysis to evaluate the impact critical peace education methods have on youth within ethnically stratified formal education systems. The primary research question for this study is: In Kosovo’s context of a formally divided education system, what role do non-formal peace education programs play in shaping youth perceptions of peace and agency? As such, a theoretical lens oriented on critical peace education will be applied to explore youth views of ‘peace’ and ‘agency’ in non-formal environments.

### ***Interpretivism and Qualitative Research***

My study is guided by an ontological assumption rooted in interpretivism. Ontology refers to our understanding on the “nature of social reality and what is knowable about the world” (Holmes, 2020, p. 1). For this study, I adopted an ontological approach based on interpretivism whereby social reality cannot be fully understood from an objective, individual perspective, as realities are diverse and individually constructed (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). In this sense, my research sought to derive subjective meaning on peace, agency, and the role of

non-formal peace education based on a negotiation of the diverse perspectives of student focus groups and staff interviews.

In line with this interpretivist assumption, I took a qualitative approach as its research generally aims to “develop concepts which help us to... gain an understanding of the experiences, perceptions and/or behaviors of those studied, and the meanings attached to them” (Agius, 2013, p. 204). Due to this focus on meanings, qualitative methods were chosen as the most applicable form of research for interpreting how non-formal peace education programs impact youth perceptions of, and agency in the peacebuilding process. Within this category, I selected a combination of student focus groups, staff semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to answer the research questions.

Focus groups were selected to gain insights into students’ perceived agency in the peacebuilding process for several reasons. First, focus groups can involve a greater number of people in less time than one-on-one interviews (Liamputtong, 2011). This allowed a wider variety of student perspectives within the time-constrained nature of this project. Second, as collaborative conversations, focus groups do not seek to homogenize perspectives on the topic of discussion (Liamputtong, 2011). Rather, focus groups generate group dynamics that help the researcher to “capture shared lived experiences, accessing elements that other methods may not be able to reach” (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 5-6). Such observable dynamics were critical to this research as I was able to see how students’ relationships with one another in the program contributed to their perspectives on agency and the peace process. Lastly, focus groups lower unequal power relations between participants and the researcher as the researcher is simply a facilitating moderator and not a locus of authoritative control (Liamputtong, 2011). In this sense,

the flow of the interaction is in the participants’ hands, not the researcher’s. This inversion of traditional control gave each participant “an opportunity to define what is relevant and important to understand his or her experience” (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 6). As someone having worked in peace education in Kosovo before, this dynamic was central to inhibiting me from generating meanings prematurely and placing my own observations before that of the students (Liamputtong, 2011).

Staff semi-structured interviews were selected to elicit the non-formal peace education program’s strategic vision/societal impact, breakdown the program’s structure/intent, and decipher the program’s practical application. With a smaller quantity of staff than students, interviews were selected over a focus group design. Additionally, whereas dynamics between students are relevant for answering the research questions, interactions between staff are not of significant importance for the scope of this study. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher utilizes a mix of previously written questions and spontaneous questions constructed during the interview (Halperin & Heath, 2020). In this way, semi-structured interviews “can give greater insight into the meanings of a subject’s experiences and hence provide more valid data” (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 5). As diverse members of the local Kosovo community, the staff have unique experiences that have led them to work in peace education and have shaped their specific contribution to the program’s curriculum and application. As such, the semi-structured format allowed me to shape the questions based on the staff member’s distinct role in the program and also permit the conversation to flow in unanticipated directions as a result of the participant’s distinct experiences.

Document analysis was added as a key part of the methodology following the student focus groups and the staff semi-structured interviews. Both students and staff mentioned integral components of the SEP curriculum that required me to analyze HYC’s *Manual on Civic Peace Education* (2022) for context and comprehensive understanding. Document analysis is a structured process for evaluating relevant written material (Bowen, 2009). Consistent with the interpretivist approach of this qualitative research, document analysis entails data being “examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). This analysis helps the researcher in three ways. First, it provides context to the setting in which the research participants are interacting (Bowen, 2009). Second, it offers supplementary data for bolstering the researcher’s knowledge base as they analyze and interpret other data (Bowen, 2009). Finally, it can “verify findings or corroborate evidence” (Bowen, 2009, p. 30). My analysis of the HYC civic peace education manual supplied me with these three elements. As I applied document analysis’ iterative process of skimming, reading, and interpreting, I obtained the full curriculum context to SEP’s curricular inclusions which provided me a holistic knowledge base for analyzing data from the focus groups and interviews (Bowen, 2009). In addition, I could verify my findings by matching curricular and staff intentions with the vocalized lived experiences of the students. In this sense, I was able to triangulate my focus group and interview data with document analysis to increase my evidence base and increase credibility (Eisner, 1991).

### ***Organizational Selection and Data Collection***

Kosovo provides a unique case study in its development of a formal education program split along ethnicity and the resultant social isolation between youth of different ethnicities

(UNMIK, 2021). Therefore, a critical interest exists in Kosovo for understanding if and how peace education should be employed to narrow ethnic separation, increase youth agency in the peace process, and sustain local peace efforts long-term.

To explore this relevant context in Kosovo, I conducted student focus groups and staff semi-structured interviews with HYC, a network of Balkans-based NGOs. For the purpose of this study, I focused on Kosovo’s program. HYC’s stated mission is to seek out those youth who are the least exposed to the 1990s Balkans conflict and engage in discussion with them on the legacy of the war’s nationalist ideologies and war crimes (HYC, 2021). Unique to this program, is their emphasis on joint-engagement and collaboration between Kosovar-Albanians and Kosovar-Serbians following the 1990s conflict. As a part of this mission, HYC developed SEP. In this initiative, approximately 100 youth ages 16-30 are selected each year from the Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian communities to develop knowledge and skills for peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The 100 youth are split into three different iterations of the program, each lasting one week.

Using a sample of students and staff from the 2022 and 2023 SEP iterations, this dissertation incorporated two virtual student focus groups followed by three virtual staff semi-structured interviews. Table 2 breaks down the gender and ethnicity of the focus group participants and the semi-structured interview participants:

**Table 2***Focus Group Participant Demographics*

Focus Group 1 Participant Demographics			
	Women	Men	Total
Albanian	2	1	3
Serbian	1	1	2
Total	3	2	5
Focus Group 2 Participant Demographics			
	Women	Men	Total
Albanian	1	2	3
Serbian	3	0	3
Total	4	2	6
Semi-Structured Interviews Participant Demographics			
	Women	Men	Total
Albanian	2	0	2
Serbian	0	1	1
Total	2	1	3

The student participants were generated using snowball sampling. This form of sampling is a convenience method meaning the researcher recruits further participants using existing participants’ connections (Naderifar et al., 2017). Sampling continues until the desired number of participants is reached. This sampling approach is usually implemented to “access people who

would otherwise be very difficult to find” (Naderifar et al., 2017, p. 2) and to target a specific group or identity. Risks to this sampling include privacy and anonymity of the participants (see more information in the ethical considerations section) (Naderifar et al., 2017). In my application of snowball sampling, I asked HYC staff to identify former SEP participants from the last five years who are 18 years of age/older. This sampling method was used because HYC staff possess the familiarity and trust to recruit willing participants and protect those who do not wish their personal information to be shared. HYC staff also had control over splitting the volunteer students into their assigned focus groups as they knew which participants felt most comfortable and safe with one another. The staff participants were also generated using snowball sampling through my collaboration with one of the HYC staff members on a previous peacebuilding project (see more information in the positionality section). All three were over the age of 18 and are current staff for SEP.

The focus groups and the semi-structured interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams and were audio recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word. This recording was given explicit written approval by each of the student and staff participants. Based on student and staff articulations of SEP curricular features, I then skimmed HYC’s civic peace education manual to identify the features noted and engage in deeper reading on them before continuing my interpretation. The data collected from these recordings and the manual were analyzed using Bajaj’s (2019) critical peace education competencies: critical thinking and analysis, conflict mapping, agency and social location, and participation and solidarity. In combination, the focus groups, interviews, and document analysis served to contextualize and reinforce one another’s conclusions through a negotiation between shared student experience, staff intentions, and written curricular features.

### *Positionality*

Positionality is “an individual’s world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context” (Holmes, 2020, p. 1). From this positionality, every researcher, especially those conducting analysis from an interpretivist approach, possess an inseparable interaction from their research participants (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). As such, a researcher’s positionality will in some way influence their work. For this reason, it is incumbent upon researchers to engage with this positionality through the application of reflexivity. The concept of reflexivity is a process of deliberate self-analysis to reveal how positionality may affect the representation of research participants (Pillow, 2003). To conduct this reflexivity, the researcher must analyze their foreign self across “places, times, or practices” (Unterhalter, 2020, p. 13) through interpreting both what they are and are not in relation to their participants. Such a practice helps the researcher and their readers to confront their positionality by identifying what they understand about the participants as insiders and what they do not understand about the participants as outsiders (Milligan, 2014).

For myself as the researcher, I am a United States student reading for the MSc in Comparative and International Education at the University of Oxford. I wrote my dissertation last year on Kosovo and spent last summer working at a university-based peace and conflict center in Pristina, Kosovo. My time in Kosovo has several insider-outsider implications for my research. One, despite having personally observed ethnic tensions and disputes while there, I am an outsider to the Albanian-Serbian ethnic conflict. I will in no way pretend to fully grasp the significant emotional, social, and political variables that permeate this conflict and its associated trauma. Two, I am an insider to the HYC organization. While not having formally participated in

their programs, I have collaborated with their organization during my time in Pristina. I established working relationships with HYC employees and observed from a distance their work, thus inspiring my pursuit of research in understanding more about their non-formal peace education program. Lastly, I am an outsider regarding the power imbalance existing between myself and my research participants. I acknowledge that, in the role of interviewer/facilitator, I possess a certain power subjectivity and deference that can skew student and staff portrayals of their organization. It is my hope in recognizing these positionalities that I can invite further reflection and introspection from my readers in evaluating the academic rigor and interpretive value of this study for further research projects building on this subject.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Before conducting any interviews or focus groups, I completed the ethical approval process through the Central University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford which required several critical planning considerations to ensure ethical conduct (see Appendix D). First, the emotional wellbeing of the participants was taken into strong consideration. This research directly involved the opinions and processes of peace education tied to ethnic tensions and conflicts that led to violence in the Balkans in the 1990s. While violence in the region is currently isolated and rare, many of the participants possessed family or friends that have been seriously impacted both physically and emotionally by the conflict in the 1990s. As such, I provided participants with a written consent form to ensure they understood they were in no way obligated to speak about anything upsetting (see Appendix C). Additionally, when participants began to discuss sensitive topics, I did not interrogate further but rather allowed them to contribute as they desired. I also did not start any of the focus groups/interviews before

introducing who I was, where I come from, my intent, and the participants’ ethical rights and protections. Participants were given a written participation information sheet and consent form that they read and signed ahead of time with an opportunity to ask any questions prior to and following the focus groups/interviews (see Appendices A, B, and C).

Second, the physical safety of the participants was emphasized. Employees and students of HYC live and work in Kosovo. Therefore, projects associated with their organization can bring negative, threatening attention to their programs’ sensitive work that is aimed at reducing ethnic tensions and violence. As such, all staff and student references were made anonymous through pseudonyms (including in citation references and the appendices). In addition, both the official name of the organization and its program were pseudonymized (including in citation references and the appendices). The staff were also given a degree of control in the research by having jurisdiction over the selection of participants and their division into focus groups to ensure staff trust and familiarity was not compromised within the auspices of their program and community. In these ways, participants’ emotional and physical wellbeing was prioritized at every stage in the research.

### ***Limitations***

The most significant limitations to this study consist of generalizability, virtual challenges, and language. First, this study draws conclusions on the nature of non-formal peace education from a single organization, HYC. As a single point of reference, this study limits my ability to apply my findings to other cases. However, this also promotes the potential for taking this study format and dissecting other non-formal organizations to test for similar outcomes. Second, conducting focus groups and interviews virtually undermines personal connection

between myself as the interviewer and my participants. Such a restraint can prevent the maximum level of trust from being garnered and can potentially cause discomfort for those participants less familiar with virtual platforms (Lobe, 2022). I aimed to resolve this limitation by introducing myself to the participants to create a form of familiarity and starting with low-level questions (see Appendix E). Lastly and on a related note, a language barrier did exist as English was not the first language for the participants interacting with me which contributed to virtual difficulties. All participants in SEP are required to have a tested level of English to partake in the program as to ensure Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian students can communicate with one another through a shared language. As such, all students and staff sampled already possessed a proven proficiency level in English. However, as speech can become altered through speakers, the difference in comfort with English and my difference in comfort with Albanian/Serbian may have obstructed clarity and accuracy in communication at times. In response, I sought throughout the study to ensure time for questions was permitted and encouraged, that I asked for further explanation at unobtrusive moments, and that I sought clarification on any parts of the transcript that were seemingly mistranslated.

### ***Methodological Implications***

While all research projects possess flaws, it is the researcher’s responsibility to be communicative both of their study’s shortcomings and how they sought to overcome these limitations. Through this section, I sought to demonstrate that where my assumptions, positionality, or methodological tools may have fallen short, my awareness of them has permitted me to emphasize the results of my study that are worth noting, learning from, and exploring further. Qualitative research is often criticized for its lack of generalizability while interpretivist

approaches are further critiqued for their dismissal of objective data points (Agius, 2013).

However, the value in such qualitative interpretivist research is not in the extrapolation of its objective findings but in the deepening of our understanding and the production of “a plausible explanation of the phenomenon under study” (Agius, 2013, p. 205). In this sense, “results are not intended to be statistically generalizable” (Agius, 2013, p. 205) but the theory formation and/or expansion from them may be applicable through follow-on research. The next section will demonstrate my findings on non-formal peace education, reveal their significance within the framework of critical peace education, and lay the stage for further research.

### **Chapter Five: Findings**

HYC’s application of SEP served as the unit of analysis for this study with the intention of isolating a specific non-formal peace education program for in-depth understanding. The two student focus groups and the three semi-structured interviews were incorporated to discern what impact non-formal peace education programs have on youth perceptions of, and agency in Kosovo’s peacebuilding process. The following paragraphs will first define an ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach. Next, the paper will address the negotiated perceptions of peace and agency between the student focus groups, staff interviews, and HYC’s manual. Then, the development of this perception will be broken down using Bajaj’s critical peace education competencies: critical thinking and analysis, conflict mapping, agency and social location, and participation and solidarity. This analysis will demonstrate that, in the case of SEP, non-formal peace education uniquely directs these four competencies towards a youth perception that sees peace and agency as objects of sensemaking. As a result, non-formal peace education does not apply hollow lamentations, but rather thought-provoking challenges integrated in a critical peace education process designed for individual perspectives but

deliberated on for collective intention. Succinctly, HYC’s non-formal program applies critical peace education through an ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach to facilitate a sensemaking view of peace and agency.

### *Individually Tailored, Collectively Constructed*

The four critical peace education competencies will frame how HYC designed and implemented an ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ non-formal peace education program to achieve a youth perception that sees peace and agency as objects of sensemaking. The overall aim of critical peace education is to develop students into “transformative change agents” (Bajaj, 2019, p. 66). SEP targeted this end state and its associated sensemaking mindset through what I call an ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach. Individually tailored refers to the program’s encouragement for students to develop a personalized awareness of and customized approach towards peace. Collectively constructed means this personalized approach is not created in a vacuum but facilitated through contextualization and collaboration with others. Non-formal education environments are uniquely positioned to facilitate this critical peace education approach. The flexibility of their environment generates the authenticity that motivates students to see themselves as individual contributors to the peace process. The environment’s emphasis on procedural knowledge over propositional knowledge incites critical thinking around the exploration of varied viewpoints (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Thus, non-formal education’s flexibility leads to the individual connection while its concentration on procedural knowledge matches the collaboration parameter. Both the student focus groups and staff interviews demonstrated these impacts of the non-formal education’s teaching and curriculum. The analysis below makes important note of the staff’s approach and their application of features from the HYC manual. These features include reinforcing peacebuilding

frameworks, historical field trip exposures, meaning-making art projects, and applicable career pathways through social entrepreneurship. In this way, SEP’s application does not rely on vague, normative appeals for peace but is rather focused on generating a shared understanding of the conflict from which practical, individual efforts are derived. As a result, students develop a sensemaking frame of mind towards peace and agency because they become conditioned to using negotiated context to decide action.

### ***Critical Peace Education and Sensemaking***

The relationship between critical peace education and sensemaking is critical to understanding what impact non-formal peace education has on youth perceptions of and agency in the peacebuilding process. As mentioned in the literature review, the crux of critical peace education is it advocates for a problem-posing education approach in contrast to a banking education one (Freire, 1970). As a result, students are involved as meaningful actors in their education through the praxis of theory, reflection, and action (Freire, 1970). What this cyclical process can generate is a sensemaking mindset whereby one transforms the world’s complexity into a “situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). In this way, sensemaking is “about making the intractable actionable” (p. 4) by conditioning oneself towards generating “plausible understandings and meanings; testing them with others and via action; and then refining our understandings or abandoning them in favor of new ones that better explain a shifting reality” (Ancona, 2011, p. 5). It is important to emphasize here that a sensemaking perspective is not about finding the ‘right’ answer but rather enabling one to act amidst change and multiple realities (Ancona, 2011). The implication for peace education is that sensemaking is a tool for processing change which makes it a “practicable means of adaptive peacebuilding” (Paananen, 2021, p. 737). Additionally, this

flexible perspective allows students to understand the plurality of peace and the existence of “different peacebuilders build[ing] different peaces” (Scholten, 2024, p. 9) to facilitate the overarching process. As such, using critical peace education to generate such a mindset in youth is favorable towards realistic and sustainable peace efforts.

For the students and staff of HYC, this sensemaking perspective encompasses their developed attitudes toward peace and agency as concepts that change with time, experience, and progress (or lack thereof). The conditions and aims of the peace process will fluctuate thus requiring a shift in agency or role (Paananen, 2021). Amidst a diverse cohort, each student and staff participant reflected a developed disposition for seeing peace and their individual agency as evolving states. When asked how he envisioned SEP shaping student perceptions of peace, program designer Henry said he cared less about their structural definitions of peace and more about “allowing them to come to their own conclusions.” Veronica, a program instructor, lamented that the program was not looking for “one outcome” in all students, “We aren’t trying to get them to agree on what peace looks like...we want them to be constantly questioning their attitudes...it’s okay to change what you think a peace should look like or require as circumstances or exposures change.” In a follow-up question on how she thought this perspective on peace affected perceived agency in students, Veronica commented that she felt students were “more aware of the diversity of roles” they could take on in striving for peace- “If you like technology, you can run social media campaigns or form Albanian-Serbian AI classes. If you’re into plumbing, you can work on crossover jobs between Albanian and Serbian communities...There is no single way.” Henry similarly concluded that this flexibility with definitions of peace and agency encouraged students to see peace as “realistic” as its outcome and their role in it depended on the context of their communities. Henry and Veronica’s insights

show that peace and agency in SEP are not meant to exist as static educational outcomes for student understanding. Instead, students are encouraged to value them as sensemaking ventures by which their attitudes can, should, and will change as contexts shift.

The student focus groups revealed that this perception towards peace and agency as sensemaking opportunities lay not just in the program’s intent but also in its lived outcomes. Focus Group 1, when asked about their motivations for entering SEP, focused on curiosity rather than an interest in peace. One student, Richard, said, “I did not really care about peace going in, I just wanted to be somewhere where all communities were represented.” Another student, Madison, agreed and said,

At first I also wasn't particularly interested like in the peace building, or like conflict transformation because I knew little about it. The flyer said you would have the opportunity to meet with young people from the other communities as well so I applied. These comments demonstrate very little perceived agency in peace besides a dose of curiosity. However, when asked how they felt they had changed by the end of the program, both Madison and Richard brought up a view based on the critical thinking and self-initiative of sensemaking. Richard articulated, “I am now eager to know more about and hear more stories about Albanian people and Serbian people as well to build on how peace should look where I’m at.” Madison followed by saying, “I want to know the why behind stories, narratives, and perspectives from family and friends and use that to improve my community.” Madison and Richard shifted their view on peace from indifference to engagement thereby reflecting an increased perceived agency. However, as reflected in their post-program sentiments, they do not view this shift as finite. They want to continue to expand their perspectives as they encounter new stimuli. As a

result, Focus Group 1 demonstrated the same opinion the staff emphasized- peace and agency are constantly in a state of sensemaking.

Focus Group 2, when asked about the shift in their perspective on peace before and after the program, reflected a similar conclusion as the staff and Focus Group 1. One student, Jake, articulated that, “This program...made it seem that, at least through these friendships we're building, peace sounds possible.” I asked him as a follow-up how he saw the connection between interethnic relationship building and youth agency. Jake answered, “This [relationship building (note from the researcher)] is the smallest step you can take...through this friendship you...interact with other communities and these trainings give you hope and guidance of how you can continue to work on this at home.” Another student in the group, Gavin, jumped in saying,

Because of the way like that these communities live kind of separate from one another, I think that we weren't like quite informed about the conflict transformation process or anything which is the reason why the training was very useful to all of us and it gave us an idea of what one solution looks like and gave us an idea of how to continue peace efforts in our own way.

Jake and Gavin’s comments both emphasize a ‘continue’ component to peace and agency. The program did not teach them the final product of what peace should look like and how they should achieve it but rather gave them greater confidence to act within their own communities. As such, like Focus Group 1, Focus Group 2 students developed a sensemaking perception of peace and agency that allowed them to see their views and roles as not stagnant but rather under development.

These testimonies from the students and staff demonstrate an effect where non-formal peace education influences youth to see peace and agency as objects of sensemaking. As a result, youth within the non-formal peace education program are not being taught the ‘right’ answer for achieving peace, but rather are learning how to confront evolving contexts to compel meaningful action (Paananen, 2021). However, the greater crux of the matter is how this sensemaking view on peace and agency is generated in students through SEP’s actions. The next sections will analyze the program using the four critical peace education competencies to demonstrate how a sensemaking perspective is derived using an ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ critical peace education approach.

### ***Critical Thinking and Analysis***

The first competency is ‘critical thinking and analysis’ whereby critical peace education programs seek to instill in students the ability to breakdown narratives, analyze the roots and impacts of forces of power, and interrogate their identity (Bajaj, 2019; 2015). This competency appears in SEP’s ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach through peacebuilding frameworks found in the HYC manual meant to one, enable students to visualize their individual relationship with the conflict and two, contextualize that relationship within the realities of other people. This instruction occurs during the first two days of the program to ensure students can practice applying the frameworks. Such a practice instills the cognitive frameworks necessary for a sensemaking perspective on peace and agency to take root. Cognitive frameworks, or schemas, “serve as mental frameworks guiding the organization and interpretation of incoming information” (Meylani, 2024, p. 1). These schemas are vital in guiding “how individuals perceive, interpret, and integrate new information” (Meylani, 2024, p. 1). In the case of the peacebuilding frameworks, students can apply these schemas to visualize, interpret, process, and

apply knowledge as they engage with unfamiliar stimuli. Such cognitive interpretation facilitates sensemaking by pushing students to negotiate old knowledge with new knowledge.

From the staff interviews and student focus groups, two frameworks from the HYC manual (2022) stood out: The Cultural Iceberg and the Lederach Triangle of Peace Leadership. Veronica explained that the Cultural Iceberg is meant to, “help students engage in intercultural dialogue because they can understand both their own culture better and others.” Krista, another SEP instructor, stated in her interview that she observed Kosovar-Serbian and Kosovar-Albanian students using the Cultural Iceberg to frame their discussions outside of the class setting, “I could see through this model they [students (note from the researcher)] were asking questions about each other’s culture like what did you learn in school about the NATO bombings and how did your parents explain the war’s start.” In connection to this, Monica in Focus Group 1 commented, “That iceberg helped me because well it helped me think about my own background. Tyler [another student in the focus group (note from the researcher)] and I in the hotel would talk about our own culture as Albanians.” Tyler then chimed in with, “The day would end, we would all hang out, so I used the iceberg to ask Serbians questions and they would ask us questions and we’d go into our rooms and be like we should have asked them this.” Focus Group 2, while not mentioning the iceberg specifically, recounted similar after hour conversations. Sarah stated, “Each day made us need to know more and made us more curious because everyone was strangers at first. We did smoke and coffee breaks together to ask more questions.”

Through these exchanges, we can see that, from the individually tailored perspective, the instructor’s inclusion of the Cultural Iceberg served to provide a functional cognitive framework for students to use in reflecting on their own culture’s connection to the conflict. Monica and

Tyler’s example shows them seeking to evaluate their own cultural dynamics. From a collectively constructed angle, this cognitive framework also encouraged students to interpret the impact their cultural facets have on the other ethnicity’s cultural norms. The after-hour conversations between Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian students demonstrates this interpretive action. These reflections stimulated students’ critical thinking for breaking down cultural narratives, understanding the dominating community influences contributing to conflict, and questioning the platitudes behind their ethnic identity. This interplay allowed students to practice a sensemaking perspective as they reconceptualized individual and collective culture to understand present fluctuations in peace. With this understanding, they could reflect on their agency to respond to those shifts positively or negatively.

The Lederach Triangle of Peace Leadership consists of three levels of peacebuilding leadership: high level political leadership, academic/religious leadership, and grassroots local leaders and youth (HYC, 2022). Henry emphasized with this triangle that, “Youth are meant to see that they are on the lowest level, but this means they have the highest influence on peace.” Veronica also commented that, “Students are used to seeing themselves on the lowest rung, so they need to hear that hey this doesn’t mean you have the least amount of impact, it actually means you have some of the most.” Henry and Veronica’s explanation shows that this pyramid is meant to provide students an understanding of how individual placement on the pyramid is associated with agency in the peace process and can therefore have influence on the other levels.

Madison, in Focus Group 1, explained that through the pyramid she learned that the top-level government can “be slow or not want peace” and the middle academic/religious leadership can “fuel more discord than peace.” She emphasized that the staff, in using the pyramid, showed her, “We [youth] make the peace process possible as the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation.” Richard agreed saying,

“Knowing we have the most influence means the burden [peace process (note from the researcher)] is now ours.” These explanations demonstrate an individually tailored angle as the students use the pyramid framework to visualize their role in the peace process and therefore their agency in it.

Focus Group 2 expanded this perspective by discussing more of the collectively constructed nature of the framework. Becca said, “The pyramid made me think about not forgetting lower levels once I reach high ones. Like as an academic or a politician you shouldn’t forget where you’re from and that others might know more than you think.” Gavin responded with,

Because you have so many people from the majority [Albanians (note from researcher)] asking that the justice comes from the top and they will not engage between communities if there is no justice...it [the pyramid (note from researcher)] made me understand that the people are the starters of reconciliation rather than some other institutions, whether it's like government or religious.

In this sense, these examples provide a collectively constructed example as the students apply the pyramid framework to see where the different actor levels either obstruct or facilitate the peace process they are part of. This broadened view shows how the pyramid dismantles narratives that claim lower levels cannot influence change, flips the picture on how dominating forces compel conformity, and increases ownership of the peace process in youth identity. Such critical thinking patterns encourage a sensemaking perspective as students visualize actors’ impacts on the peace process and accordingly understand the factors inhibiting and advancing their agency.

Overall, under the ‘critical thinking and analysis’ competency, SEP applied an ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach through peacebuilding frameworks.

These frameworks allowed students to collaborate with one another using a shared format from which they could derive personal understanding of their own culture and placement in the peace process. From this, students began to develop the necessary cognitive frameworks for a sensemaking perspective towards contextualized peace and adapted agency.

### ***Conflict Mapping***

The second competency is ‘conflict mapping’ whereby critical peace education programs aim to teach students how to identify the historical roots of conflict and understand the power dynamics contributing to conflict (Bajaj, 2019; 2015). Conflict mapping occurred in SEP’s ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach through historical site visits and personal testimonies. This program component took place immediately following the first two days of peacebuilding framework instruction. The historical exposures aimed to personalize the conflict by providing shared first-hand encounters and directly contrasting the multiple angles of the conflict. Such experiences allowed students to apply the previously learned cognitive frameworks with a new stimulus thereby allowing them to see the value of a sensemaking perspective on peace and agency.

The HYC staff all agreed the site visits are one of the most empowering aspects of SEP. Two areas are visited, and both are the preserved sites of war crimes. One being a site where ethnic Albanians were massacred, the other being a site where ethnic Serbians were massacred. Additionally, both site visits include the testimonies of family members who experienced the massacres and live with its impact today. Krista explained that, “The visits are meant to demonstrate that both sides of the conflict, Albanians and Serbians, are instigators.” Veronica said in her interview that, through the site visits, “We want to remove the ethnic component, and focus on the core problem of hate.” When I asked Henry if he could provide insight on the site

visits’ purpose he commented, “These visits demonstrate how people reach such a point of hate and discrimination. It is not through malice but lack of exposure.” All three staff demonstrate here a desire for students to contextualize their relationship to the conflict with this new stimulus of the site visits. Each staff member went on to explain that, following the site visits, the students conduct a ‘Conflict Tree’ mapping exercise from the HYC manual (2022) where they discuss the causes, core problem, and effects of the conflict. Veronica described that, “Now the students all have personal experience with both conflict sides, so they can remove the ethnic component and concentrate on the conflict roots.” This description by the staff demonstrates the ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach. For individually tailored, students now have a personal connection to both angles of the conflict to draw on. For collectively constructed, students are experiencing this personal moment with a diverse group to generate shared thoughts and feelings. As such, when the students engage in the ‘Conflict Tree’ exercise, they are able to use shared personal exposure to the conflict to construct a more holistic map of the problem. This process demonstrates to students the value of sensemaking as they are using an experience to change their mindset on the peace process and adapt their agency in it accordingly.

From the student perspective, this historical site visit was just as impactful as the staff articulated. From Focus Group 1, Richard, a Kosovar-Serbian student, described himself as “shocked” when he visited the site of the Poklek Massacre. He elaborated, “All his family died, 50 to 54 Albanians, and here he is saying he doesn’t hate Serbs, just wants peace and justice. He did not want revenge, or he would have taken it a long time ago.” Madison followed Richard with, “This exposure also sparked sharing of our own families’ experiences which was emotional but important for us in seeing that ethnicity is not the problem as we all suffer together.” Focus Group 2 discussed more of the implications this shared emotional experience had on the group

dynamics. Rachel articulated, “It was like a flood gate opened you know? We had confronted emotions, addressed the elephant in the room, and could now not be sensitive in discussions because we knew we had all felt pain.” Jake agreed and said, “No accusations occurred, we recognized shared hurt, and acknowledged the past to move forward.”

These focus group conversations show that, from the individually tailored angle, each student evaluated their biases and confronted a personal piece of their emotional connection to the conflict. From the collectively constructed perspective, this site visit encouraged students to collaboratively discuss biases and emotions so they could move forward with an inclusive mapping of the conflict. In this sense, this approach developed conflict mapping skills by requiring students to visualize the conflict as a multi-faceted problem requiring both individual perspective and shared experience to identify historical roots and power dynamics. As a result, this flow taught students the value of sensemaking as they used a new stimulus to expand their perspective on the peace process and adjust their agency in it.

### *Agency and Social Location*

The third competency is ‘agency and social location’ whereby critical peace education programs aim to teach students to recognize possible forms of agency and develop the necessary strategies to sustain it (Bajaj, 2019, p. 68; Bajaj, 2015, p. 162). SEP incorporated this competency in its ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach through a collaborative art project at the end of the program. The SEP attendees are divided into four groups to learn practical, real-world skills in peace advocacy through four options: storytelling, photography, theater, or videography. Students are taught how to use their learned peacebuilding frameworks and conflict mapping tools to connect with their communities. The student groups design, build, and perform their projects before later displaying them in public venues in each of

their communities. This exercise allows students to practically implement their new peacebuilding knowledge in a dynamic way through crafting an individually salient yet collaboratively built project. With this combination, students get to apply their sensemaking perspective to design a message relevant to the state of peace in their community and associated with an agency meaningful to their skills and interest.

The HYC staff described this art process as the most ‘unique’ of SEP’s components. Henry said, “Once the students have decided on a topic, we hire facilitators from these fields to help teach so they learn skills in the four areas for peace efforts.” These facilitators come from the Kosovar community and include both Albanian and Serbian ethnicities. Some of them are even former students of SEP who have gone on to apply their creative vocations towards peacebuilding. Veronica commented, “Having past students encourages current students to value their effort and take the projects seriously. It is not just a workshop exercise but a chance to make change.” Each student gets to choose which art option they’d like to be a part of and thus are able to choose a form that is most representative of how they communicate.

For the students, these art projects take on a critical role in shaping their attitudes towards peace and agency. Elizabeth said, “These projects are different because they represent truth but also involve emotion. They are a combination of personal experiences and different communities.” As the focus groups described their different art projects, it became clear that each one was designed to reflect multiple individual realities and speak to an array of communities. Some involved humor and others tragedy based on the personalities involved in the design and the geographical communities determined to be the audience. Focus Group 1 discussed a storytelling project in which the students crafted a message emphasizing shared humanity over identity. The written piece is about a man and a woman who are isolated from

their parents for marrying while being of different ethnicities. The couple eventually give birth to a daughter in Kosovo who, once older, seeks out her grandparents in Serbia. When she finds them, they do not speak the same language, but they embrace her and love her anyways because she is family. Monica, a Kosovar-Albanian, and Elizabeth, a Kosovar-Serbian, were members of this project and explained that the story was based off of real experiences they both had lived in their communities. Monica articulated, “We wanted to surface shared humanity and gather over thoughts of shared sadness, not identity.”

Focus Group 2 described a theater group project where three actors represented different ethnic identities: Albanian, Serbian, and Roma. The three start speaking softly on stage in each of their different languages before escalating to a shouting match of “I don’t understand you” as they realize they cannot communicate with a shared language. The narrator then gives context to each of the three actors. The Serbian fell in love with an Albanian girl, but his community would not allow him to marry her. The Albanian had an abusive father, but she and her mom were saved by a Serbian man. The Roma felt invisible and unsafe as they were discriminated against and overlooked by both the Albanian and Serbian communities. In the end, the narrator brings them together through shared music. Jake, a Kosovar-Albanian, and Sarah, a Kosovar-Serbian, designed this project. They also articulated that the project was based off each of their lived experiences and finding the shared emotions they felt from these traumatic moments. Jake said, “People in real life, had a similar experience, which was so sad for everyone. That is when we understood it. It wasn’t just a theater show it really was a story and not just for one, but for many.” Sarah expanded with, “Many others, they have to bury their feelings just because the communities won’t allow them to be together or they can’t be themselves because of the traditions or the unwritten rules of not mixing with other communities or whatever.” She

explained that this project was meant to show individuals in these communities that they are not alone and can have the courage to share.

Tyler, from Focus Group 1, discussed a more humorous representation of the conflict through the videography group project. Two Kosovar-Serbian students and two Kosovar-Albanian students took turns trying to guess the correct words for certain objects in each other’s language. Every time they got a word wrong, they had to jump in the pool. At times, they even discovered they had the same word for an object in both languages. At the very end, all four jumped in the pool together because they were “all wrong and losers together.” Tyler said that he and his group wanted to show that, “Yes, we might have had conflict, or we might in the past have disagreements, but we still have similarities, and we can work together.”

These projects demonstrate the ‘agency and social location’ competency by instructing students on different forms of agency they can apply- storytelling, photography, theater, videography- and connecting them with facilitators who teach them how to utilize such vocations and skills for sustainable peace. With an individually tailored approach, the students get to choose an art form they feel empowered through and get to incorporate their particular lived experience of the conflict. From the collectively constructed perspective, students connect over their lived experiences, negotiate how to communicate them, and find a salient way to present the combined story to their communities. As a result, students use their cognitive tools developed in the first half of the program to practically apply a peacebuilding project and witness its community impact. Such application facilitates a sensemaking perspective in students as they are crafting a message unique to the state of peace in their targeted community and applying a form of agency conducive to that message.

### *Participation and Solidarity*

The last competency, ‘participation and solidarity’ is when critical peace education programs seek to help students identify participation forms that are both possible and meaningful, understand how context influences participation forms, and recognize what solidarities are necessary for peace advancement (Bajaj, 2019; 2015). SEP applied this competency in its ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach via social entrepreneurship. This concept is defined as “a process in which citizens either build or transform institutions in order to answer social problems” (HYC, 2022, p. 114). The HYC manual (2022) emphasizes four skills for this peacebuilding effort: economic intelligence, socially motivated, courage, and quick and alternative thinking. Social entrepreneurship can be applied in post-conflict situations as a tool for “adapting, addressing, and altering conflict” (HYC, 2022, p. 114). In addition to aiding in conflict transformation, it grounds individuals in a realistic and sustainable approach to peace by speaking to three elements affecting personal growth and success in societies: what you can be the best in the world at, what drives your economic engine, and what you are deeply passionate about (HYC, 2022). The overlap of these elements or the ‘hedgehog’ reveals the optimal position where individuals can make significant contributions to peace while also providing for their families and pursuing vocational success (HYC, 2022). As a result, this analysis of one’s overlapping interests permits a sensemaking mindset for seeing peace and agency as more than just normative terms, but rather practical, adaptive pursuits.

HYC staff introduced social entrepreneurship to students on the final day of SEP through applying the ‘hedgehog’ concept in combination with business skills development. Veronica explained, “At the very end, we go over grant proposals, how to write projects, and build budgets

in hopes that it can help them pursue jobs or extracurriculars related to peace. The students individually brainstorm and come together to design.” In addition, SEP provides launching points for students to continue what they learned through opportunities outside the program. Veronica elaborated by describing the Facebook/Instagram activist group they have in which former SEP participants are invited to monthly brainstorming sessions on how HYC can better serve communities. In Veronica’s words, “We want students to feel important and heard on how they see youth needs and know they have a role in tackling big issues.” HYC also has a grant students can apply for to conduct projects they design as well as internships and fellowships. These social entrepreneurship opportunities demonstrate the ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach as students are encouraged to evaluate their unique interests, both value-based and professionally driven, and then work with others to bring those interests to life. As a result, students adopt a sensemaking perspective that evaluates peace in a context beneficial to others and themselves and construct an agency that meets both moral and economical pursuits.

Many of the students from the focus groups have either received the grant or pursued the internship/fellowship. Gavin is an intern who aids HYC in their human rights and advocacy training where he works to “increase dialogue between communities and bring communities together.” Madison is an intern at HYC’s office in Belgrade, Serbia where she leads efforts on confronting hate speech on the internet. She described, “Being an intern in Serbia lets me personally disprove biases in my family and friends. My mom would tell me ‘Don’t speak Albanian on the bus [in Serbia (note from the researcher)]’ but now I can show her nothing bad happens.” Richard has a grant to conduct community building activities in Mitrovica, the Kosovar city split along ethnic lines. Richard articulated he is seeking to demonstrate that, “Living together is possible and beneficial.” When I asked how these social entrepreneurship

opportunities have impacted their perceptions of peace and agency, the students all had similar responses. Madison said, “I feel empowered as a student, not belittled. I can go into new places and make change.” Gavin emphasized, “I can imagine different angles through active listening and make an inspiring vision, so peace is not a dream, it is reality.” Richard articulated, “Peace is hard but possible. Don’t ignore your power to change, even in the unfamiliar.” All three describe here an embracement of ambiguity and a desire to have an impact despite the ever-shifting context of peacebuilding.

These testimonies demonstrate ‘participation and solidarity’ as the students seek to involve themselves in professional opportunities adjusted to the angles of peace that interest them while also rooted in empathy for others. As such, social entrepreneurship exemplifies the ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach as students are one, encouraged to identify their personal talents, passions, and economic interests, and two, are taught how to collaborate with others to bring the overlap of those three components to life. This approach results in students feeling empowered to take on grant proposals, internships, and fellowships to apply the skills and attitudes they learned as a potential career. In this manner, a sensemaking perspective is derived towards peace and agency because students must understand the unique ecosystem of peace in their community to properly identify the vocational path with which their agency can have an impact. With this understanding, students see peace as an achievable and economically viable state capable of being influenced.

### *Critiques*

While the student focus groups and staff interviews primarily focused on the program strengths behind the ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach, there are a few critiques worth mentioning. One, the emphasis on Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian

relations excludes other minority groups. These groups include Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, and Turkish populations. While none of the students in the focus groups belonged to these communities, Jake and Sarah brought this insight to light when speaking about their theater project in which they collaborated with a Kosovar-Roma participant. Jake commented, “You can tell he [the Kosovar-Roma (note from the researcher)] was trying to find their place. We talk so much about Albanians and Serbians but not about their story.” In other words, because the primary State conflict is between Kosovar-Albanians and Kosovar-Serbians, minority groups are often overlooked and subjected to the structural problems of the formal environment despite being non-formal. As Johnson & Majewska (2022) warn, students may continue to feel isolated and excluded in the non-formal environment if the program is still designed for a specific group.

Next, the staff discussed the vulnerability of the non-formal program to political events. Recent tensions in Kosovo have escalated due to several incendiary political decisions. In April 2023, Kosovar-Serbians boycotted local elections in protest over the denial of their requests for greater autonomy (Bajrami & Semini, 2024). As a result, Kosovar-Albanian mayors won the local elections leading to greater unrest amongst the Kosovar-Serbian population (Bajrami & Semini, 2024). Kosovar-Serbian demonstrations turned violent in several key municipalities leading to 93 injuries within the civilian demonstrators and the NATO forces sent in to deescalate the situation (Bajrami & Semini, 2024). Furthermore, in September 2023, 30 armed Serbian men captured a monastery in Banjska, Kosovo by force leading to an hours-long exchange of gunfire with one Kosovar-Albanian police officer dead and three of the armed Serbian attackers dead (Gigova et al., 2023).

Krista commented that the political tensions and the terrorist attack severely undermined recruiting efforts for both Kosovar-Albanians and Kosovar-Serbians as fear inhibited curiosity

towards the other. She also lamented that such escalations in relations led to less constructive dialogue during SEP. Krista described that,

During the massacre site visits, students focused less on understanding and more on the politics. They asked the speaker if they thought Kosovo belonged to Serbia or if they thought Kosovo was independent. These questions were not helpful, we had to patch relations with the massacre site speakers and reassure students on both sides they were safe with each other.

The flexibility and openness of the non-formal environment can therefore have constraints. Its non-mandatory nature makes it susceptible to political and societal turmoil that can downturn recruitment and participation (Jackson, 2023). Additionally, its concentration on free dialogue can permit deconstructive conversations that increase student discomfort and handicap collaboration between ethnicities thereby reinforcing ethnic stigmas (Johnson & Majewska, 2022).

While the SEP largely had a positive impact on students, its shortcomings in minority inclusion and management of increased political tensions are beneficial to recognize. Further research on and designs of peace education programs can note these traps and identify ways to overcome the cons in non-formal environments. HYC recruitment should incorporate greater efforts towards targeting minority communities outside the Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian majority areas. HYC should also form written plans for circumventing political escalations by setting collaborative participant expectations in the program. In this sense, students entering the program spend the first day articulating and recording what a constructive dialogue setting looks like to them. Hopefully, such a tactic can create common expectations between students and discourage deconstructive questions and comments.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion**

The above analysis of the student focus groups, staff interviews, and HYC manual demonstrates that HYC’s non-formal peace education program, through the lens of critical peace education, shapes youth perceptions to see peace and agency as objects of sensemaking. Vital to this shaping is their application of an ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach by which students evaluate their perception of and agency in the peace process based on the lived experiences of both themselves and others. More significantly, this role is not taught to be a static one but rather a dynamic one. While Bajaj’s (2019) critical peace education competencies serve as an excellent introductory analytical framework, there are limitations. Critical thinking and analysis, conflict mapping, agency and social location, and participation and solidarity are all program features, but they do not necessarily denote key environmental factors impacting student engagement, mindset, and transformation. HYC’s application of SEP expands this framework by demonstrating the contextual attributes present in non-formal education institutions. Several takeaways merit emphasis from this expansion: the progressive and reinforcing build of HYC’s implementation of the critical peace education competencies, the flexibility of the non-formal environment for encouraging student participation and interaction, and the prioritization of a sensemaking mindset for contributing to sustainable peace.

### ***Progressive and Reinforcing***

Standing alone, the critical peace education competencies do not necessarily produce an overlapping relationship. To reach this effect, the environment of the peace education program must be constructed to connect the competencies. SEP layered each critical peace education competency through a key program activity: critical thinking and analysis- cognitive frameworks for peacebuilding, conflict mapping- historical site visits and personal testimonies, agency and

social location- collaborative art projects, and participation and solidarity- social entrepreneurship. The analysis of the student focus groups, staff interviews, and HYC manual reveals how HYC designed these activities and their corresponding competencies to possess a progressive and reinforcing relationship. Each iteration is built upon the derived knowledge and developed skills of the previous. Students learned cognitive frameworks from the HYC manual to evaluate their relationship with the conflict and contextualize it with others’ lived experiences. Next, students utilized these frameworks during historical site visits to holistically map the conflict based on diverse perspectives. The art projects then served as an opportunity for students to practically apply the frameworks and their broadened understanding towards a peacebuilding initiative. Finally, students were introduced to social entrepreneurship by showing them attainable avenues for using their new knowledge, skills, and experience to pursue vocational paths conducive to the peace process. This progressive flow of knowledge, skills, experience, and application pushes youth to increasingly grow out of their comfort zone by exposing them to new learning environments.

In addition, these activities are reinforcing as they each emphasize the ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach. Each activity incorporates an element of individual analysis and awareness that is then contextualized through the negotiation of their perspective with others’ lived experiences. In this manner, the progressive build and the iterative reinforcement facilitate a sensemaking perspective towards peace and agency by conditioning students to the introduction of new stimuli while retaining familiar thinking patterns.

### ***Flexibility***

This analysis also reveals key takeaways towards the flexible nature of non-formal settings. The critical peace education competencies would not be effective nor would the

sensemaking attitude be developed unless students felt safe and comfortable enough to engage in SEP. The ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach lets students know it is okay for them to not only have their own perspectives, but to share those viewpoints. Students are encouraged to see shared communication and disagreement as facilitating the peace process, not obstructing it. While the scope of this paper is not to compare non-formal peace education directly to formal peace education, it is important to note that this area may be a strong source of differentiation. Where a formal peace education environment may seek to standardize student perspectives on peace and agency, a non-formal peace education environment like SEP intends to diversify them (Schultze-Kraft, 2022). Formal environments can be restricted by national regulations and narratives that can suppress individualized approaches to peace through regurgitated neutral language (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). While not inflammatory, the decision to take a neutral approach to peace and conflict does not allow for healthy discord to surface nor for the negotiation of diverse perspectives to occur. This restriction is thus likely to generate disillusionment in youth. In Kosovo, the formal education system is split along ethnic lines meaning, not only are students subjected to national narratives, but they are limited in accessing other ethnic perspectives (Selenica, 2021). In contrast, SEP, lying outside the confines of national standards, sought to respond to the students’ personal lived experiences and encourage them to contextualize those experiences with others. As a result, SEP’s ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ non-formal approach did not institute opaque requisitions for peace but encouraged healthy discord from which to derive shared understanding and personal ownership of the peace process.

### *Sustainability*

The critical peace education competencies also do not denote a difference between short-term or long-term goals in peacebuilding. HYC’s non-formal peace education generated a sensemaking frame of mind in students to facilitate long-term vision or sustainability in the peace process. As established earlier, the point of critical peace education is to make students “transformative change agents” (Bajaj, 2019, p. 66) while sensemaking is a “means of working with change” (Paananen, 2021, p. 737). In this sense, critical peace education and sensemaking are overlapping concepts as sensemaking enables students to enact impactful change. Peace is a process and thus possesses a shifting nature that is incredibly adaptive to changing conditions (Diehl, 2026). For those seeking to impact this process, flexibility, perseverance, and patience are key as expectations are often impeded and overturned. Sensemaking helps students to avoid disillusionment with peace by empowering them to control what they can control: their attitude towards change (Ancona, 2011). Rather than see change as an obstruction, SEP instilled the sensemaking mindset in students by conditioning them to respond efficiently and effectively to new stimuli and adjust their agency accordingly. In this manner, SEP’s instillation of a sensemaking mindset aids in a more sustainable peace as Kosovo’s foundation, its youth, are prepared to seek the possible in what seem to be intractable scenarios (Ancona, 2011). In addition, SEP taught students not just to respond to change but seek it from their peers. SEP encouraged students to use sensemaking to actively pursue diverse perspectives and narratives. As a result, a sustainable peace is facilitated because it is representative of all those involved thereby contributing to the “different peacebuilders build different peaces” (Scholten, 2024, p. 9) concept. Youth who embrace and seek change through this sensemaking approach ensure that, even in the face of unanticipated spoilers and obstacles, the peace process can move forward.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This study sought to investigate non-formal peace education’s role within Kosovo’s unique peacebuilding context. Using HYC’s non-formal peace education program of SEP, I conducted student focus groups, staff semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to qualitatively answer what role non-formal peace education programs play in shaping youth perceptions of peace and agency. Using Bajaj’s critical peace education competencies as an analytical framework, this paper found that SEP, through the lens of critical peace education, shapes youth perceptions to see peace and agency as objects of sensemaking. In consequence, non-formal peace education creates authentic environments for students that cater to their individual context while encouraging critical discourse with others. This ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach thus facilitates settings that do not feel morally disingenuous but rather practically applicable to securing a sustainable peace thereby demonstrating the value of a sensemaking mindset.

To harken back to Maria Montessori’s (1972) initial quote, “establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war,” (p. viii) non-formal education environments employing critical peace education approaches are critical to this aim. The sensemaking mindset towards peace and agency allows youth to be adaptive in their approaches to peacebuilding. Non-formal organizations like HYC create settings that allow youth to identify their particular agency within their specific community context for peace. However, the beauty of this individual approach also lies in its potential for collaboration. HYC encourages youth to identify how their different approaches to peace are connected and therefore reinforce one another. As critical peace education espouses, education is not about reaching the definitively correct answer, but rather finding better questions to lead to new avenues of inquiry (Bajaj,

2019). Further research should explore if other non-formal education environments employ critical peace education using a similar ‘individually tailored, collectively constructed’ approach. In addition, this exploration should seek to identify whether similar applications of critical peace education result in a youth sensemaking mindset towards peace and agency. With the identification of sensemaking from this research, future research should also investigate the role of sensemaking in peacebuilding. This adaptive, change-oriented mindset holds many potential positives for facilitating sustainable peace in all components of the peace process. If positive peace is a “a slow and never-ending process,” (Scholten, 2024, p. 6) sensemaking empowers this by giving individuals the tools to adapt quickly to new stimuli seeking to throw the peace process off. Treating peace and agency as static rather than dynamic concepts ignores their complexity and stalls all efforts for contextualization.

If the aim of peace education is truly to cultivate a culture of peace and inculcate youth as empowered actors in peacebuilding (Schultze-Kraft, 2022), then non-formal environments employing critical peace education are key. Critical peace education in a non-formal environment is not about passive acceptance but about active interpretation. The sensemaking perspective towards peace and agency prepares students for tackling seemingly impossible scenarios and transforming them into possibilities for sustainable peace. At the beginning of this paper, I shared my experience with Mitrovica and posed the thought on how a society can approach reconciliation between two sides so firmly set in retaining physical and social separation. Non-formal peace education exercising a critical peace education approach provides a pathway to resolving this question. As I wrapped up the focus groups, I anticipated the awkward silence and pause of individuals closing out of the Microsoft Teams screen. Instead, I was met with a chorus of, “Who is heading to Mitrovica today?” “I’ll be there!” “I can call a taxi

if we want to go together!” After debating on whether it was overstepping to ask for clarification, I hesitantly enquired as to where they were all going. Richard, a Kosovar-Serbian, and Madison, a Kosovar-Albanian, smiled and laughed and said they were getting ready to host dinner for their SEP classmates after the virtual focus groups. “We do this at least once a month,” Madison explained. Richard elaborated,

I try to invite somebody new who did not do the program each time so they can see, we are all human, the narratives are not real. We take turns, sometimes it’s in the Serbian area of North Mitrovica, other times it’s in the southern Albanian area.

I thanked them for their time and smiled as Madison got the last word in, “Byyyyye Richard, see you on the other side!” While starting out as seemingly impossible friends, clearly these students have found the art of the possible in partnering to pursue sustainable peace for their communities.

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Krista. (2024, May). Semi-Structured Interview.

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Sarah. (2024, May). Focus Group 2.

Savannah. (2024, May). Focus Group 2.

Tyler. (2024, May). Focus Group 1.

Veronica. (2024, May). Semi-Structured Interview.

## Appendix A

### Student Participant Information Sheet

#### ‘Individually Tailored, Collectively Constructed’: Non-Formal Peace Education in Kosovo

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_064

Dear [REDACTED] Alumni,

You are being invited to partake in a focus group for a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Reach out if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

#### Why is this research being conducted?

Peace education is a “field of scholarship and practice that utilises teaching and learning not only to dismantle all forms of violence, but also to create structures that build and sustain a just and equitable peace” (Bajaj, 2019, p. 65).<sup>1</sup> In addition, this field is aimed primarily at youth who are the future leaders and changemakers in society. In this manner, youth’s capacity to shape the peace process or have ‘agency’ is a critical aspect to effective peace education.

Kosovo provides a unique comparative study in its development of a formal education program split along ethnic lines. Within peace education studies, there is a research gap to be met in understanding how non-formal peace education initiatives, as separate from formal government structures, impact youth relations with the overarching peace process and youth’s agency in that system. UNMIK reports that today over 70% of Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian youth have never personally interacted with their peers from the other ethnicity (UNMIK, 2021).<sup>2</sup> Thus, a critical interest exists in understanding if and how peace education should be employed to narrow ethnic separation between youth and increase youth agency in the Balkans peace process.

This research seeks to answer the following question: in Kosovo’s context of a formally divided education system, how do non-formal peace education programs impact youth perceptions of, and agency in the peacebuilding process? To answer this question, the researcher plans to use a series of

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<sup>1</sup> Bajaj, M. (2019) ‘Conceptualising Critical Peace Education for Conflict Settings,’ *Education and Conflict Review*, 2, 65-69.

<sup>2</sup> UNMIK (2021) ‘Looking Skywards: Sharing Their Passions and Building Trust, Kosovo Youth Come Together Under the Stars,’ *United Nations Peacekeeping*. Available at: <https://unmik.unmissions.org/looking-skywards-sharing-their-passions-and-building-trust-kosovo-youth-come-together-under-stars>.

student focus groups and semi-structured interviews with peace education staff. By exploring this topic, the researcher hopes to better understand two dynamics. First, how peace education programs can be effectively implemented through community-based NGOs that lie outside formal government structures. Second, how such programs might empower youth as agents of change in the peace process. As such, the project’s outcome will be to investigate this understanding in the context of a Kosovar NGO, the [REDACTED] and have the results published as a dissertation at the University of Oxford’s Department of Education.

### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

As an alumni of [REDACTED] from the past five years, I would like to invite you to partake in a focus group seeking to answer the research aims and objectives summarized above. All participants in the focus group must be between 18 years of age or older.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this study is strictly **voluntary**. You may skip any question(s) in the focus group that you feel uncomfortable answering, or you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time by asking me to stop the focus group without any reasons necessary. No information will be recorded if you withdraw before completing the focus group. If you decide to withdraw from the research after the conclusion of the focus group, all data associated with your involvement will be deleted prior to the submission of the dissertation on the noon of the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2024.

### **What will happen to me if I take part in the research?**

The focus group will take place virtually via a Microsoft Teams link in May 2024. Consent for the focus group will be taken through a signed written consent form that you must return to me prior to your participation in the focus group. The focus group will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. There will be 2 focus groups with each consisting of 5 to 6 different individuals who are all alumni from [REDACTED]

During the focus group, I will ask questions from a pre-designated list of 7-10 questions (see attached). You will have the opportunity to engage with the other members of the focus group to respond and will be encouraged to diverge from the questions if you feel you have valuable contributions from a different angle. The purpose of this focus group is to gain insights into your opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and perceived agency in the peacebuilding process and if or how [REDACTED] impacted these perspectives.

With your consent, I would like to audio record (NO visual recording) and transcribe the focus groups so that I can have an accurate record of the conversation. You can pause and stop research activities at any time. This audio recording will only be listened to by myself for reflection during the writing process of the dissertation. No individuals or organizations external to the focus group will be given access without your explicit written approval.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?**

The research directly involves opinions and processes of peace education tied to ethnic tensions and conflicts that led to violence in the Balkans in the 1990s. While this violence has diminished, I understand reservations in approaching these sensitive topics. To alleviate concerns you may have regarding feared consequences, your contributions will be made anonymous through a pseudonym and all personal details will be kept in a password protected One Drive folder to which only the researcher and her supervisor will have access.

Additionally, as peacebuilding and ethnic reconciliation are inherently tied to negative and often traumatic events related to war, segregation, discrimination, and violence, I want to ensure you that you are in no way obligated to speak about anything upsetting. Additionally, in discussing sensitive topics, I will not push the topic forward but rather allow you space to contribute more if you desire to. Should a distressing topic be approached, you have full permission to leave the focus group without any explanation.

### **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for you in participating in the research, this research gives you the opportunity to reflect on your contributions, experiences, and challenges within the realm of peacebuilding. Such reflection offers two potential paths forward: sustainment or adaptation to peace education design and implementation. In this sense, by understanding ■■■ more comprehensively, its use can either be sustained and spread or adapted and reapplied to empower Kosovar youth more effectively as agents of change in the peacebuilding process.

To enable equitable research, I will send all participants a draft of the audio transcript prior to data analysis so you will have the chance to clarify any words, phrases, or contributions you provided. By investigating the role non-formal peace education organizations like ■■■ play in a multiethnic society, the project has the potential to reveal how non-formal mechanisms shape youth perceptions of peacebuilding as well as their agency in the peace process. Hopefully this discernment can help peacebuilders to better understand how peace education programs can be locally driven in empowering youth as agents of change.

### **What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant?**

Regarding descriptive personal data, you will be asked to provide your name, ethnicity, email address, ■■■ participation year, and current education path, occupation, or chosen life activity. This information provides context for the data collected. The focus group audio recordings and transcripts are meant to ensure accurate recollection on my part as the researcher to provide a holistic representation of your experience during ■■■. Data gathered during the focus group depends entirely on your contributions. In this sense, you have absolute control over your articulation of your opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and perceived agency in ■■■ and the broader peacebuilding process.

All research data will be stored securely (password protected) to a subject-specific file folder on my University One Drive account. Each participant will have a separate folder containing their descriptive personal data and their written consent form. Research data will include and be stored through the following:

**Written Consent Records:** Stored in your specific participant file folder on One Drive.

**Contact Details:** Stored in your specific participant file folder on One Drive. All participant details will be made anonymous through a pseudonym, and your direct name will never be used in any external documents or the dissertation itself.

**Audio Recordings:** Stored in the focus group iteration file folder on One Drive as transitioned from the Microsoft Teams Portal.

**Audio Transcripts:** Stored in the focus group iteration file folder on One Drive as transitioned from the Microsoft Teams Portal.

**Written Notes:** Stored in the focus group iteration file folder on One Drive (any written notes will be destroyed after uploading to One Drive).

The pseudonymised and personal data (including consent forms) will be stored digitally in the password protected University OneDrive files until the project completion on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2024. After this point, all research data (written consent records, contact details, and audio recordings), except the audio transcriptions, will be deleted/destroyed from the OneDrive. The audio transcriptions will be transferred to the University OneDrive of the project dissertation adviser to be stored for 3 years ([University of Oxford ethics policy](#)). After these 3 years, the audio transcriptions will be permanently deleted. All written notes will be destroyed following the end of the project on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2024.

Only myself as the researcher and my dissertation supervisor will have access to the research data. Any external access will require your explicit written approval.

### **Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications?**

The findings from the research will be written up as a dissertation for completing the MSc in Education (Comparative and International) at the University of Oxford. A copy of my dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

I would like your permission to use direct quotations from your focus group in my dissertation. If you agree, you will have a pseudonym applied to all direct quotations so your identity will remain anonymous to the public.

Should the findings and analysis from this research project be significant, I would also like your permission to have the dissertation I write submitted for potential publication in an online, peer reviewed journal as well as potentially presented at an academic conference. Again, all quotations and references would be anonymous under a designated pseudonym.

### **Data Protection**

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal

data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University’s Information Compliance web site at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

### **Who has reviewed this research?**

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_064)

### **Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact myself as the Researcher, [REDACTED] or my dissertation supervisor, [REDACTED] we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee;  
Email: [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk); Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

### **Further Information and Contact Details**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

[REDACTED]  
Department of Education, University of Oxford  
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY  
Phone: [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]

## Appendix B

### Staff Participant Information Sheet

#### ‘Individually Tailored, Collectively Constructed’: Non-Formal Peace Education in Kosovo

#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_064

Dear [REDACTED] Staff Member,

You are being invited to take part in a semi-structured interview for a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Reach out if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

#### Why is this research being conducted?

Peace education is a “field of scholarship and practice that utilises teaching and learning not only to dismantle all forms of violence, but also to create structures that build and sustain a just and equitable peace” (Bajaj, 2019, p. 65).<sup>3</sup> In addition, this field is aimed primarily at youth who are the future leaders and changemakers in society. In this manner, youth’s capacity to shape the peace process or have ‘agency’ is a critical aspect to effective peace education.

Kosovo provides a unique comparative study in its development of a formal education program split along ethnic lines. Within peace education studies, there is a research gap to be met in understanding how non-formal peace education initiatives, as separate from formal government structures, impact youth relations with the overarching peace process and youth’s agency in that system. UNMIK reports that today over 70% of Kosovar-Albanian and Kosovar-Serbian youth have never personally interacted with their peers from the other ethnicity (UNMIK, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Thus, a critical interest exists in understanding if and how peace education should be employed to narrow ethnic separation between youth and increase youth agency in the Balkans peace process.

This research seeks to answer the following question: in Kosovo’s context of a formally divided education system, how do non-formal peace education programs impact youth perceptions of, and

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<sup>4</sup> UNMIK (2021) ‘Looking Skywards: Sharing Their Passions and Building Trust, Kosovo Youth Come Together Under the Stars,’ *United Nations Peacekeeping*. Available at: <https://unmik.unmissions.org/looking-skywards-sharing-their-passions-and-building-trust-kosovo-youth-come-together-under-stars>.

agency in the peacebuilding process? To answer this question, the researcher plans to use a series of student focus groups and semi-structured interviews with peace education staff. By exploring this topic, the researcher hopes to better understand two dynamics. First, how peace education programs can be effectively implemented through community-based NGOs that lie outside formal government structures. Second, how such programs might empower youth as agents of change in the peace process. As such, the project’s outcome will be to investigate this understanding in the context of a Kosovar NGO, the [REDACTED] and have the results published as a dissertation at the University of Oxford’s Department of Education.

### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

As a manager, designer, or instructor for [REDACTED], I would like to invite you to partake in a semi-structured interview seeking to answer the research aims and objectives summarized above. All participants in the interview must be 18 years of age or older.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Your participation in this study is strictly **voluntary**. You may skip any question(s) in the interview that you feel uncomfortable answering, or you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time by asking me to stop the interview without any reasons necessary. No information will be recorded if you withdraw before completing the interview. If you decide to withdraw from the research after the conclusion of the interview, all data associated with your involvement will be deleted prior to the submission of the dissertation on the noon of the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2024.

### **What will happen to me if I take part in the research?**

The interview will take place virtually via a Microsoft Teams link in May 2024. Consent for the interview will be taken through a signed written consent form that you must return to me prior to your interview. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. There will be 3 interviews, each with a different [REDACTED] staff member.

During the interview, I will ask questions from a pre-designated list of 7-10 questions (see attached). You will have the opportunity to respond and will be encouraged to diverge from the questions if you feel you have valuable contributions from a different angle. The purpose of this semi-structured interview is to gain insights into the [REDACTED] program vision, design, and implementation as well as your perception of how your staff member role influences youth participants’ perspectives of and agency in the Balkans peacebuilding process.

With your consent, I would like to audio record (NO visual recording) and transcribe the interview so that I can have an accurate record of the conversation. You can pause and stop research activities at any time. This audio recording will only be listened to by myself for reflection during the writing process of the dissertation. No individuals or organizations external to the interview will be given access without your explicit written approval.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?**

The research directly involves opinions and processes of peace education tied to ethnic tensions and conflicts that led to violence in the Balkans in the 1990s. While this violence has diminished, I understand reservations in approaching these sensitive topics. To alleviate concerns you may have regarding feared consequences, your contributions will be made anonymous through a pseudonym and all personal details will be kept in a password protected One Drive folder to which only the researcher and her supervisor will have access.

Additionally, as peacebuilding and ethnic reconciliation are inherently tied to negative and often traumatic events related to war, segregation, discrimination, and violence, I want to ensure you that you are in no way obligated to speak about anything upsetting. Additionally, in discussing sensitive topics, I will not push the topic forward but rather allow you space to contribute more if you desire to. Should a distressing topic be approached, you have full permission to leave the interview without any explanation.

### **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

While there are no immediate benefits for you in participating in the research, this research gives you the opportunity to reflect on your contributions, experiences, and challenges within the realm of peacebuilding. Such reflection offers two potential paths forward: sustainment or adaptation to peace education design and implementation. In this sense, by understanding ■■■ more comprehensively, its use can either be sustained and spread or adapted and reapplied to empower Kosovar youth more effectively as agents of change in the peacebuilding process.

To enable equitable research, I will send all participants a draft of the audio transcript prior to data analysis so you will have the chance to clarify any words, phrases, or contributions you provided. By investigating the role non-formal peace education organizations like ■■■ play in a multiethnic society, the project has the potential to reveal how non-formal mechanisms shape youth perceptions of peacebuilding as well as their agency in the peace process. Hopefully this discernment can help peacebuilders to better understand how peace education programs can be locally driven in empowering youth as agents of change.

### **What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant?**

Regarding descriptive personal data, you will be asked to provide your name, ethnicity, email address, ■■■ involvement year(s), and current education path, occupation, or chosen life activity. This information provides context for the data collected. The interview audio recordings and transcripts are meant to ensure accurate recollection on my part as the researcher to provide a holistic representation of your experience during ■■■ Data gathered during the interview depends entirely on your contributions. In this sense, you have absolute control over your articulation of your opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and perceived agency in ■■■ and the broader peacebuilding process.

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Only myself as the researcher and my dissertation supervisor will have access to the research data. Any external access will require your explicit written approval.

### **Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications?**

The findings from the research will be written up as a dissertation for completing the MSc in Education (Comparative and International) at the University of Oxford. A copy of my dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

I would like your permission to use direct quotations from your focus group in my dissertation. If you agree, you will have a pseudonym applied to all direct quotations so your identity will remain anonymous to the public.

Should the findings and analysis from this research project be significant, I would also like your permission to have the dissertation I write submitted for potential publication in an online, peer reviewed journal as well as potentially presented at an academic conference. Again, all quotations and references would be anonymous under a designated pseudonym.

### **Data Protection**

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This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_064).

**Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact myself as the Researcher, [REDACTED] or my dissertation supervisor, [REDACTED] and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee;  
Email: [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk); Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

**Further Information and Contact Details**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

[REDACTED]  
Department of Education, University of Oxford  
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY  
Phone: [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix C

Written Consent Form

Consent to take part in 'Individually Tailored, Collectively Constructed': Non-Formal Peace Education in Kosovo

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: EDUC\_C1A\_24\_064

Purpose of Study: This research seeks to answer the following question: in Kosovo's context of a formally divided education system, how do non-formal peace education programs impact youth perceptions of, and agency in the peacebuilding process? To answer this question, the researcher plans to use a series of student focus groups and semi-structured interviews with peace education staff. This form must be completed, signed, and emailed back to the researcher by: 21 April 2024

Please initial each box if you agree with the statement

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until 09/AUG/24, without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications.

I consent to being audio recorded.

I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.

Use of quotations: I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable (anonymous through an assigned pseudonym).

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

I understand that I am in no way obligated to speak about anything upsetting and may leave the project at any time.

I give permission for the results from this dissertation to be submitted for potential publication in an online, peer reviewed journal as well as potentially presented at an academic conference.

I agree to take part.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

dd / mm / yyyy  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person taking consent

dd / mm / yyyy  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## Appendix D

### University of Oxford CUREC Approval Letter

Department of Education, Social Sciences Division

University of Oxford

26 March 2024

Dear [REDACTED]

#### Research ethics approval

Research title: Owning change: Informal peace education in Kosovo

**Research ethics reference:** EDUC\_C1A\_24\_064

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University’s procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

**Personal data:** It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

**In-person activities:** Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office’s [website](#).

**Amendments:** Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) / [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) or [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely  
Aliya Khalid  
DREC member

## Appendix E

### Draft Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups

#### Program Manager Interview Questions:

1. What brought you to work for the Youth Exchange Program?
2. Where did the idea for this program originate from?
3. What was your original vision for this program?
4. Has your program vision changed at all?
5. How does this program fit into the larger Balkans peacebuilding process?
6. Were there any significant outside contributors to kickstarting and sustaining this program?
7. Do you feel the program has any particular effect or fills any particular gap in the context of Kosovo’s formally divided education system?
8. How would you define ‘youth agency’?
9. What are some ways you feel this program encourages ‘youth agency’ in Kosovo’s peace process?
10. What role do you envision ‘youth agency’ having in Kosovo’s peace process?
11. Do you have a future plan to grow or adapt this program?

#### Program Designer Interview Questions:

1. What brought you to work for the Youth Exchange Program?
2. Where did you derive inspiration for this program’s design from?
3. What did the design process for this program consist of?
4. Were there any significant outside contributors to designing this program?
5. Do you feel the program has any particular effect or fills any particular gap in the context of Kosovo’s formally divided education system?
6. How would you define ‘youth agency’?
7. What are some ways you feel this program encourages ‘youth agency’ in Kosovo’s peace process?
8. What role do you envision ‘youth agency’ having in Kosovo’s peace process?
9. Do you have any ongoing plans to change this program?

#### Instructor Interview Questions:

1. What brought you to work for the Youth Exchange Program?
2. What is the most important change, skill, or takeaway you want youth to walk away from the program with?
3. What unique skills or characteristics do you feel you contribute as an instructor in the program?
4. Do you feel the program has any particular effect or fills any particular gap in the context of Kosovo’s formally divided education system?

5. What program methods do you perceive as particularly impactful on youth?
6. What methods do you feel need to be revised in the program?
7. How would you define ‘youth agency’?
8. What are some ways you feel this program encourages ‘youth agency’ in Kosovo’s peace process?
9. What role do you envision ‘youth agency’ having in Kosovo’s peace process?
10. What have you learned from the students through your involvement in this program?

**Student Focus Group Questions:**

1. What brought you to the Youth Exchange Program?
2. What were your attitudes towards the Kosovo peace process going into the program?
3. What aspects of the program were particularly impactful for you?
4. What aspects of the program would you modify or change?
5. What were your attitudes towards the Kosovo peace process after attending the program?
6. Do you feel the program has any particular effect or fills any particular gap in the context of Kosovo’s formally divided education system?
7. Has your involvement in the program changed you? If so, how?
8. How would you define ‘agency’?
9. What are some ways you feel this program encourages your ‘agency’ in Kosovo’s peace process?
10. Has your involvement in the program shaped your path forward or impacted what you are involved in now?
11. With this experience, how do you envision the peace process moving forward in Kosovo now? How do you view your role in moving it forward?