

Listen to the Sound of Change: Interethnic Cooperation for Children with Disabilities
Bosnia and Herzegovina
In partnership with Macalester College

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rhythm.ba (late September/early October launch)

The goal of this project was to conceptualize peace by providing practical and lasting change in education of children with disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The intention was to realize this goal by involving three ethnicities of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina in recording audiobooks. More specifically, the steps were the following: recording 29 audiobooks and providing instructive manuals for their use (that when coupled, can make this neurodevelopmentally appropriate for individual needs), and uploading all audiobooks on a website that will be free and online accessible to everyone with (un)diagnosed developmental impairments, and other populations in need of reimagined rehabilitation practices (e.g. elderly) or a source of accessible education (e.g. Roma population in BiH).

The idea for my project came to me because of my nephew Ante who is four and has suffered a prenatal brain injury (picture: mac02). He is being treated with medicine used for spastic cerebral palsy (without being diagnosed yet). His parents (and parents of many other children with neurodevelopmental disabilities) live in an uncertainty on how their children's brain will respond, in three years, to challenges that BiH's rigid educational system provides. From my side, I was trying to understand if there is a way to provide alternative ways to aid their information processing, so they can at least have one more option to choose from when obtaining knowledge (and when the structures of "normality" start to grab them inside the box). Literature was an easy pick for me because it had a robust empirical support, and it changed my own life. With poems of Sergei Yesenin, little me dreamed of a different world, a little bit more accepting and comforting. Janica with this project also wanted to assure that if there is a world these children want to visit and want to build, that there will be a free and hopefully neurodevelopmentally appropriate way for them to access it. This summer, I started my Davis project, the movement, under the banner of short and direct name "Rhythm Ba".

The issue that my project responds to is the lack of appropriate educational resources in schools for CWD. Schools in the region I worked in (Mostar, Herzegovina) stated that they do not even have physical books. Understandably, the first potential challenge and explanation is that neurodevelopmental disabilities vary in levels of severity and characteristics not just among different groups but among individuals within the same group of impairments. This fact makes any type of macro instruction and coverage, futile, without particularized approaches that could help instructors assess better the needs of each individual. This influenced our own timeline of manual preparation to post implementation. The second complication is that there is no funding devoted directly to improving educational practices in schools taking care of this population. The advantage of Rhythm Ba is that audiobooks will be freely available on a website, so each school for CWD in the country will have access to it and can work with us to adjust it to needs of each student. The third complication is general numbness to these topics because of a lack of traction in the media.

My project was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, even though I designed it with the pandemic in mind. Most of my interaction with hired personnel happened through wires. For instance, the narrators, who were essential for the completion of the project, I have seen none in person. Narrators were in different cities than me and it was essential to compromise the deadlines since many of them worked for free (which is why several books are still being recorded as we speak). Regardless of mentioned difficulties, it is great for me to see how different sectors of society came together. We actively

involved more than 20 national radio stations, then actors, artists, libraries, teachers, schools and organizations for people with impairments. All the communication happened remotely, a miracle of a sort. What I regret a little bit is the inability to interact much with the children who will be using our technology, the main reason being their summer vacation and precautions. We at the team of Rhythm Ba are hopeful to meet in December.

The majority of project implementation was funded by P4P. Our expenses were different from expected, but we have come upon people who kindly offered their time and efforts. The surprising aspect of the project was also most heartwarming, and within Rhythm Ba we decided to look for outside financial support for individuals who voluntarily served the role of narrators. We managed to find it at the regional hygiene products company "Violeta", that signed with us to supply gift packages of their own making for all our volunteer narrators. We were encouraged to try fulfilling the promises written in the application form even when we realized that they required substantial financial support. Hence, we reached out to another regional partner INAHolding, that decided to support needs of Rhythm Ba mini studios for voluntary recording activities post implementation. Lastly because of this project's evaluative importance, the Political Science department of Macalester College decided to support my personal expenses including research into potential empirical significance, assessed as the audiobooks start being used in classrooms.

Some advice for future P4P grantees regarding the pandemic related challenges is to give yourself grace and be extremely patient. People who work with us ("the organizers") live separate lives from your us and our project. When most of the impression of your own sincerity happens throughout the phone, you need to think twice before speaking. Make sure to be specific in your instruction. I had many radio partners, actors and artists, and I wrote separate contracts and conditions of cooperation for each sector, so that we are clear on what we are agreeing in our partnership. If you are working with many people and need information from them, Qualtrics serves great. Qualtrics allowed me to collect information from personnel quickly and efficiently and store them in one place for retrieval. It is also very useful to have a friend or employee on-field who can help you with coordination, if you alone are the organizer. My coordinator Lorena helped me immensely by being engaged fully in the project and knowing the ins and outs of each collaborator, so our phone calls certainly have been less stressful and cooperation more successful. Furthermore, now that I am in the States, she supervises the expansion efforts that we have been communicating about with certain organizations outside of Mostar. Lastly, I did mention that establishing so many successful partnerships for me was a miracle of a sort, however there were rejections and no responses during this summer, perhaps many more than successful attempts. I did not observe them as personal failures (and I could), but I focused on specific steps that could have influenced them. In the first week of reaching out to radio stations, none of them responded to my request. We at the Rhythm Ba hub realized that BiH people perhaps do not use email that much even if they have an email address, hence phone calls may do better. They did and people in fact were interested in what we were saying. Please do not get discouraged by failing to acquire all you visualize. Try your best, give yourself some grace and try some more. We are in this place because we are so lucky but also because many people believed in us. Covid-19 and other circumstances will influence your plans and move your deadlines, as it happened with my plans; but try your best to predict how could you counter the difficulties that have high probability of appearing. If it still happens and shakes you up, it will still be alright. Breathe, and keep going, slowly, step by step.

In three months of work, we have brought to reality the following: a movement "Rhythm Ba" involving more than 50 members from 20 cities around BiH; recorded 29 audiobooks, with remaining 6 in the making, for a total of 35 audiobooks recorded in the summer of 2021 (more than 400h of recorded material); we are launching a free website for use of audiobooks with Soundcloud as podcast provider later this month; we opened the first Rhythm Ba mini studio for voluntary recording activities post completion in Mostar (visit us at Djure Spuzevica 6!); we promoted local artwork of 9 artists placing their artwork as audiobooks interface; we actively engaged more than 20 radio stations in narration activities;

we engaged regional actors and teachers in narrative activities and book list recommendations (for informed recording). Upcoming activities for completion: Upload of remaining 6 audio recordings; manual creation after first month of use (November); deliver purchased recording equipment to schools (Zoom recorders); discussions for expansion: travelling mini recording studios with two interested organizations (October-December). Please check updates on what happens with these in the upcoming months, on our upcoming webpage!

- How was this project valuable for you?

Correctly assessing the lived life of others is a challenge project organizer is familiar with, that even after raising up to it, one almost always falls short. What is valuable in having done an on-field project is understanding that your efforts, if sincere and transparent, will further what we know, and your courage will extend the ideas of others. And at the end of the day, we will be at a better place than yesterday.

Janica Kozina