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Creating alternative futures through storytelling: A case study from Serbia

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the project *Storytelling for Peace, Gender Partnership and Cultural Pluralism*, initiated in 2009 in Novi Sad, Serbia, with the primary aim of promoting educational strategies which challenge the continuation of the dominator society's status quo and facilitate the emergence of alternative, progressive and socially inclusive futures. Constructive storytelling was chosen as an educational practice that can bring about change, and was used as a tool for the transfer of alternative worldviews because it is indirect, flexible and inexpensive. The main beneficiaries of the project were the students of the University of Novi Sad and teachers and children of Novi Sad primary schools. The project utilised local knowledge and languages to foster peace and partnership-oriented individual and social narratives through the process of alternative story writing and revision of traditional Serbian and European tales. The participants learned to deconstruct master narratives, to understand deep culture and how its underlying myths shape national identity. Alternative stories became a tool to teach critical thinking and promote a diversity of voices.

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1. Introduction: hegemonic and alternative educational futures

There is no shortage of articles and books critiquing out-dated modes of education, arguing that mainstream education is still trapped in a 19th century industrial mindset [1–5]. Furthermore, notions of the future in education are often overwhelmingly 'singular, vague and abstract' [6] or 'tacit, token and taken for granted' [7]. Currently, the dominant neoliberal ideology and its influence on education make it difficult to challenge mainstream views of the future [8] – which also means that both official and unofficial curricula continue to be plagued with images that 'colonise the future', rationalise direct, structural and ecological forms of violence and so restrict young people's creative imagination about alternatives [9–12]. Lastly, the relationship of young people with the future is complex and contradictory [13], and the future is often viewed by them with 'trepidation and ambivalence' [14].

To address the above-mentioned issues, futurists working in the areas of educational and peace futures have highlighted the importance of enabling young people to envision the future alternatives more clearly [15]. These futurists have argued that it is important to learn from a very young age to be future-oriented [16] and they have also expressed a 'deep concern for the negative effect school education has on young people's images of the future' and their proactive attitude towards it [17]. They have argued that, instead, 'young people need to be given the opportunity to recognise the interaction between their

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own understandings of the world as it is now and the vision of what it might become' [18]. Further, research has shown that future outlooks of young people affect their living conditions in adulthood [19] and that using future narratives in critical pedagogy can be a way to work more closely with students and their perceptions of social change [20]. In doing so, and in the tradition of Fred Polak and Elise Boulding, educators have used 'image literacy and play of imagination' [21]. This is important because the image of the future that an individual holds determines what attitude he/she has towards the future and how he/she behaves in the present [22]. In that sense, cultivation of imagination remains a central 'futures tool' [11].

Another futures tool, Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), has outlined specific processes which enable transformative spaces in order to generate alternative futures [23]. CLA as a pedagogy [24] enables students to examine the pervasiveness of the myths and metaphors which underpin dominant, 'colonised' futures, and to create critical distance from them. In this way, CLA promotes 'interaction and dialogue at many levels of understanding' [24]. Research has also suggested that using CLA and integrating futures thinking and methods into pedagogy can indeed help students move away from dominant/ hegemonic futures narratives and in 'directions essential for alternative, sustainable futures' [25].

One of the central tenets of CLA is that deep culture 'eats strategy for breakfast' [26]. In other words, if the underlying assumptions, myths and metaphors that form deep culture do not change, our futures will continue to bring 'more of the same' and 'business as usual' scenarios. This phenomenon may help to explain why, despite all the massive technological, demographic, social and cultural changes our world has seen over the past centuries, education processes, by and large, remain 'stuck' in the 19th or 20th century paradigm. It also helps to explain the disjunction between some officially proclaimed progressive goals, within both education and society in general (i.e. gender equality, multiculturalism, nonviolent conflict resolution, a "fair go" for all) and the educational practices which actually reinforce existing social hierarchies and the status quo. In other words, despite education being the utopian measure *par excellence* [27], used both to educate about the need for important social changes as well as in enabling adjustment to those changes, mainstream education/schooling systems and processes seem still to be the foremost instrument of social control.

Progressive educators, on the other hand, have attempted to use educational processes to facilitate a move away from hegemonic futures narratives, which continue to reinforce inequity, human 'one-dimensionality' and various forms of violence. They have also attempted to challenge 'more of the same' approaches to the reform of contemporary education as well as 'back to the past/back to basics' initiatives [5,28]. They have done so by establishing informal educational initiatives and/or alternative educational institutions. Moreover, various reforms, such as adjectival education initiatives,[1] have been implemented within mainstream educational institutions. These initiatives have been influenced by critical theory and constructivism in education as well as by a long tradition of efforts by various educational reformers. Some influential educational reformers who took issue with mainstream education and attempted to inspire and/or create alternative educational approaches include a whole range of theorists and practitioners from (more commonly acknowledged) Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, Carl Rogers, Alexander Sutherland Neill, and Rudolf Steiner, to (less commonly acknowledged) Riane Eisler, Lev Tolstoy, P.R. Sarkar, Sri Aurobindo, Sathya Sai Baba, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Mahatma Gandhi, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Tsunesaburā Makiguchi and Daisaku Ikeda. With all their differences, what these educators have in common are their attempts to enable democracy rather than authoritarianism and to foster ethical and caring relations in and through education. Most of their initiatives have been based on qualitatively different (implicit or explicit) visions of and for the future; visions predominantly based on values such as justice, equity and fairness. For some of these education theorists and reformers values such as peace, inner (spiritual) and outer (social justice) transformations were at the core of their ideas. Contemporary efforts that carry on this transformative tradition emphasise the need for social, cultural and epistemic change. They go beyond futures defined mostly by the three pillars: (1) the capacity of technology to solve all problems; (2) linear progress as the underlying mythology; and (3) the accumulation and expansion of material goods as the main goal of civilization. Instead, they see radically different futures – both preferable and possible – wherein deep cultures are significantly transformed. This transformation means a move away from the 'dominator model' of organising human affairs (which emphasizes control, authoritarianism, violence, gender discrimination, and environmental degradation) and towards a 'partnership model' that embodies equity, environmental sustainability, multiculturalism and gender fairness [30].

In this latter tradition, a particular educational initiative has been developed in Serbia, namely the *Storytelling for Peace, Gender Partnership and Cultural Pluralism* project. The remaining sections of this article provide a summary, background, rationale, objectives and description of the project. Preliminary and early outcomes, as seen by primary stakeholders and targeted groups who participated in the project, are also discussed. Lastly, questions about radically different futures are raised, as well as about the educational practices needed to bring them about.

2. Storytelling as an educational and futures tool

> All societies have important 'stories' which enshrine elements of cultural identity. But what if some of those 'stories' are based on prejudice and discrimination against the Other? Sometimes stories need to be re-told in ways which open up new avenues of communication and which offer visions of a more just and equitable world. [31]

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[1] The term "adjectival education" is used to 'describe a related set of social and political educations, which often have an adjective before the word 'education'; examples include human rights education, development education, peace education, social justice education' [29].

Storytelling is one of the primary modes of transferring important narratives (which make our movement through space and time meaningful) between individuals; but a qualitative distinction between 'destructive' and 'constructive' storytelling can also be made. Peace educator Jessica Senehi [32] explains this distinction by connecting destructive storytelling with damaging social practices, defining it through its association with 'coercive power, exclusionary practices, a lack of mutual recognition, dishonesty, and a lack of awareness'. Futurist Riane Eisler finds examples of destructive storytelling in many traditional European tales, many of which portray humans as 'bad, cruel, violent and selfish' [30] and are 'full of cruelty, trickery and violence' [30]. These tales stem from a dominant worldview promoted within what Eisler terms a "dominator society model" or "androcracy". According to Eisler's macrohistorical approach, androcracy gives high priority to technologies of domination and destruction, and as such represents one end of a continuum of patterns for structuring human societies [33]. At another end, there is an 'ideal type' (in a Weberian sense), or model, of organising society, based on principles which focus on sustaining and enhancing life [33]. Eisler terms this alternative gylany, a partnership model that embodies equity, environmental sustainability, multiculturalism, and gender-fairness. At the opposite end from gylany, the dominator model emphasises control, authoritarianism, violence, gender discrimination, and environmental degradation. In a time of the disequilibrium of the current systems, these ideal types are the two basic choices in front of us – with our future depending on a cultural shift towards partnership [33]. While the dominator model relies on 'myths and stories honoring and sacralizing domination', the partnership model is based on 'myths and stories honouring and sacralizing partnership' [30]. In Senehi's [34] terms, such (partnership-oriented) storytelling is 'constructive', defined as an inclusive process that 'fosters shared power and mutual recognition, creates opportunities for openness, dialogue, and insight, brings issues to consciousness'. As such, constructive storytelling can be a means of resistance, a tool for the creation of alternative futures, as well as 'an important means for establishing a culture of peace and justice' [34].

However, partnership-based educational approaches do not merely replace one (hegemonic) truth with another. Rather, partnership education tells various stories and offers multiple narratives [30]. The main function of partnership education is not to completely replace texts that consist mostly of dominator-based elements with those that are more 'politically correct'. On the contrary, the role of partnership education is more to help young people *critically evaluate narratives* that make the dominator model seem inevitable, desirable, and even moral [30]. Moreover, the main goal of partnership education is to offer alternative stories and to help young people to see the full range of their alternatives, both individually and socially [30]. In doing so, partnership education can provide young people with hope for the future by showing that viable partnership alternatives exist and that dominator relations are not unavoidable. In other words, dominator society's past or present need not be extended into the future. The presentation of such explicit alternatives indirectly shows in which ways dominator-based narratives are not inevitable, but also 'totally inappropriate for [creating a] better future – that is democratic, peaceful, equitable and Earth honoring' [30]. Lastly, Eisler argues that by understanding the two basic choices for our collective futures – partnership and dominator cultural, social and personal configurations – we can 'more effectively develop the educational methods, materials, and institutions that foster a less violent, more equitable, democratic, and sustainable future' [30].

3. Socio-historical, educational and cultural context: Serbia

While Serbia shares certain European civilisational characteristics and patterns, as described above, it also has some particular features, as do all regions, nation-states and localities. To start with, Serbia is a post-conflict society (civil wars over Yugoslav secession/succession in the 1990s). Furthermore, it has recently emerged from fifty years of socialist autocracy. It is a society that had been colonised by various empires for centuries (i.e. Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian) and which had also attempted to colonise others (i.e. expansion during Middle Ages, early 20th Century Balkan wars). In terms of Eisler's typology, Serbia continues to be, by and large, oriented more towards the androcracy end of her two ideal models continuum. Partnership based initiatives co-exist with dominator-style initiatives, the former mostly promoted by pro-European Union (EU) democratic political options and various social justice-oriented NGOs. At the same time, 'back to the (idealised) past' narratives feature prominently, threatening to prevent the emergence of alternative, and positive, partnership-oriented futures.

As is the case with all androcracies, the dominator model in Serbia also relies on specific myths and stories which honour and sacralise domination [30]. As androcracies strongly align with patriarchy, common themes in Serbian folk tales include stories which directly or indirectly promote the inferior status of women and their consignment to the private sphere of family. Broadly speaking, four main patterns can be identified in traditional Serbian literature as far as the representation of women is concerned: (1) women who are either mothers or nurses (e.g. the Mother of Nine Jugović Princes; Mother of Prince Marko, and the Girl from Kosovo); (2) evil women (e.g. the cursed princess Jerina); (3) nameless women (also passive women, as well as subordinates of the main male characters in the story), and; (4) women as victims of violence. Violence in these stories and myths is especially prominent and is one of the key means of resolving conflict. Lastly, other ethnicities are most commonly portrayed as enemies; potential foes rather than potential friends.

These narratives are part of the core curriculum in mainstream education. Despite official proclamations about equal rights and the absence of discrimination based on 'gender, social, cultural, ethnic, religious or other belonging' [35] underlying narratives constituting Serbia's 'deep culture' [36] which indirectly promote various forms of discrimination remain. To 'retain culture', centuries-old stories are taught as part of literacy and literature classes, usually using rote learning approaches and rarely applying critical literacy. Understanding the dangers of hidden curricula, some educators

[37] have argued that 'just letting students read and write is insufficient. They need to become, among other things, critical text users, sensitive to the types of meanings and values in texts, aware of stereotypes and discourses operating in texts'. As teachers of writing, they continue, 'we cannot ignore racist, sexist, or violent content in texts' [37]. In line with what Eisler calls the partnership paradigm, the ultimate goal becomes the facilitation of students' critical literacies and the enhancement of their ability to make informed choices between narratives. We 'want our students to compose texts that are not sexist or violent' argue Emmit et al. [37]. Such moving away from past-oriented or 'auto-pilot' narratives and towards informed choices for individual and collective futures remains a cornerstone of 'futures literacy' [28,38].

Recent research done in Serbian schools, however, has shown that challenges to dominator narratives (through, for example, social inclusion and peace education initiatives) are sparse. For instance, 'questions relevant for understanding of gender (in)equality do not appear as an explicit topic in any of the analysed educational programs' [39]. The official curriculum maintains dominator narratives, even though ad hoc and one-off initiatives have been attempted (for example, the UNESCO-sponsored School without Violence programme). These initiatives are spread far and wide and are insufficient as far as the creation of alternative presents and futures is concerned.

Another recent study conducted in 50 schools in Serbia (26,947 students and 3397 adults) showed that 65% of students had experienced some form of violent behaviour over the last three months at least once and 24% more than once [40]. The results from two research projects done by the Center for the Prevention of Deviant Behaviour in Novi Sad (the second largest city in Serbia) show that nearly 70% of schoolchildren experienced some form of violence in schools and that half of them either brought weapons to school themselves or saw their school mates do so [41]. Of course, these occurrences are not only related to what is happening (or not happening) in mainstream education institutions, they reflect the situation in the society at large.

Furthermore, marginalisation and discrimination of certain minority ethnic groups, most prominently Romani people, continues. As argued by Milica Simić, Coordinator of the Expert Committee on Education of the League of Roma Decade, Republic of Serbia: 'institutional discrimination within education is one of the most difficult forms of discrimination which Roma children are experiencing…. Stereotypes and biases about the Roma population certainly contribute to the social isolation of the Roma community and maintain discrimination as the majority's right' [42]. This is despite research findings which clearly show that better interaction between teachers and Romani children as well as between Romani children and children of other ethnic background is instrumental to the improved achievement of Romani students [43].

To address the above-described issues, an explicit yet indirect and dialogical approach in working with children and young people has shown some promise [44]. Whilst being a proverbial drop in the ocean, the *Storytelling for Peace, Gender Partnership and Cultural Pluralism* project was initiated in 2009 in Novi Sad, focusing on specific educational strategies to challenge the continuation of the dominator society's status quo and to facilitate the emergence of alternative, progressive and socially inclusive futures.

4. *Storytelling for Peace, Gender Partnership and Cultural Pluralism* project

The purpose of the *Storytelling for Peace, Gender Partnership and Cultural Pluralism* project has been to address violence, and gender and cultural stereotypes in Serbian educational materials and society. The project has also aimed to address the connections between masculinity, nationalism and violence [45,46] as well as to provide viable alternatives to these detrimental discourses. This has been done through the creation of alternative narratives that promote diverse and peace-oriented worldviews and skills and help create alternative futures.

Most commonly, issues around violence, gender and cultural stereotypes are discussed at the 'litany' level, or in terms of data and discrete events. As explained by Inayatullah [23] at the litany level quantitative trends and problems, often exaggerated and used for political purposes are usually presented by the news media. In the Serbian context, this refers to nearly daily reporting about violence in schools or amongst young people on the street. Gendered based violence, as in domestic violence, is also commonly reported as are incidents of inter-ethnic violence. Social or systemic causes (second level of CLA) are almost always discussed separately, and commonly link high incidents of violence with the previous systems of totalitarianism, civil wars, poverty, and the collapse in morality/ethics due to changing social systems. Discussions related to the third level of CLA analysis which is concerned with structure and the discourse/worldview that supports and legitimates it are usually confined to more marginal spaces, for example, within women's and peace-oriented NGOs. These NGOs often critique patriarchy and social militarism present in both educational processes and society as a whole and occasionally move to the fourth level of CLA analysis: the level of metaphor or myth. This level refers to the 'deep stories, the collective archetypes, the unconscious dimensions of the problem or the paradox' [23]. As these stories go into the very heart of cultural identity the critique of certain collective archetypes, for example, those that support violence, xenophobia, racism and sexism, is often met with aggression by their 'defenders'. We have therefore elected to use more subtle techniques in addressing sensitive issues of violence, gender and cultural based discrimination. Instead of dealing with these issues 'head on' and through a form of critique we decided to gently lead participants away from detrimental cognitive frameworks that they may hold unconsciously. In the workshops and through the project we described the importance of working at the myth and metaphor level and how to both challenge existing and provide alternative frameworks of meaning via non-confrontational strategies.

Storytelling was thus chosen as a tool for the transfer of alternative worldviews and skills due to its typically more 'indirect and respectful–rather than prescriptive and didactic – method of teaching' [34]. Additionally, storytelling is a

powerful, flexible, accessible and inexpensive method which, if done constructively, can be utilised for (positive) peace building [32,47–49]. Active participation of young people in the process of creating the new stories and new mythology needed for a peace- and partnership-oriented society cultivates critical literacy and helps to negotiate identities and construct meanings. It also promotes further understanding of the interaction between the social structure and human agency and the role of power in the making of knowledge. Especially in the context of a post-conflict society such as Serbia's, storytelling can assist with the healing of trauma and help to foster forgiveness and reconciliation. This can help break the cycle of violence that is currently still very strong in Serbian society, as well as help initiatives and the overall movement towards a culture of peace. Furthermore, 'learning to work with story as an access point to culture is significant for peace practice that is sensitive to local culture' [50]. It is thus of crucial importance that local knowledge and local language are utilised to develop peace- and partnership-oriented individual and social narratives, simultaneously providing an access point both to local culture and to transformative and sustainable peace-based processes. It is also important that these transformative and sustainable peace processes incorporate discussions on gender and multicultural issues, with the purpose of eliminating negative gender and cultural stereotypes as well as working towards social justice and the social inclusion of marginalised groups.

In concrete terms, the first phase of the project involved the authors of this article writing alternative stories [51]. Whilst revision of traditional, classic tales in children's literature (and visual media) is now commonplace in the Anglosphere, such attempts, and specifically along the lines of explicit gender-, peace- and multiculturalism-oriented narratives, have rarely been made in Serbia.[2] The objective behind alternative story writing was the revision of traditional Serbian and European tales and the provision of alternative narratives, solutions to problems and story endings. Two classic Serbian stories had two different retellings: modelling a plurality of options rather than replacing one 'truth' with another. Altogether, ten stories and one poem were used as material for workshops with students, parents, teachers and members of community groups, which took place in 2009–2010. The new stories were also trialled with primary school children. The project was accredited in 2010 as an in-service training programme for teachers' professional development (INSET). For this purpose a team of ten trainers was formed. Due to a number of unforeseen circumstances the project was put on hold and its first implementation took place later than planned, during the 2012/2013 school year. The project was implemented as a pilot study and was conducted in five primary schools in Novi Sad by education students from the Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad. The students received training for the project which was part of their *practicum* (pre-service experience in schools for undergraduate students).[3] The project encompassed 52 workshops in which 32 pedagogy students, 17 teachers and 400 children participated. Another similar project was realised in cooperation with the City of Novi Sad Library. It included workshops with the librarians of 24 children's libraries, which belong to the city library network. The second phase of the project carried out by trained librarians in the autumn of 2013 encompassed 109 primary schools, their librarians and 800 children. In addition to the schools and libraries, the project was implemented at informal education events in the city, such as Bajkodani ("Fairytale Days", held 24th November, 2012 and 12th–13th November 2013).

The workshops followed this format (in summary):

1. Acquainting the participants with the most important concepts in relation to gender equality, peace education and equity in education.
2. Introducing the concept of the deconstruction of traditional stories and culture as a process. Looking for patterns of gender and ethnic marginalisation, violence – enabling meta-analysis.
3. Reading of alternative, 'retold' stories; analysing 'reconstruction'; commenting on and analysing contemporary society and global and local culture (including contemporary retellings of stories in written text, as well as in film).
4. Encouraging the participants to write their own stories, going back to a certain point in a traditional (and retold) story from which alternative solutions are to be offered; discussion about a multitude of different [possible] endings.

The process was adjusted depending on the composition of the groups of participants and their age. With the young children the process involved three main steps:

1. The reading or retelling of a story or poem from the book *Who is Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?*
2. Activities which involved the creation of the participants' own desired storylines through writing, drama or art.
3. Discussions about the importance of storytelling.

The trial confirmed most findings from the previous research and also raised important issues as far as educating for alternative, socially just and inclusive futures is concerned. However, since this was a pilot project, further research on a larger scale is required to determine the dynamics amongst the children and between children and teachers/facilitators.

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[2] The authors of this text are not aware of any such previous attempt, despite thorough research – for this reason they decided to co-author the book [51].

[3] The pilot study/project received the support of the following government bodies in 2012: the Provincial Secretariat for Culture and Media [Pokrajinski Sekretarijat za Kulturu i Javno Informisanje], the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Serbia; and the Provincial Secretariat for Education, Administration and National Minorities [Pokrajinski Sekretarijat za Obrazovanje, Upravu i Nacionalne Zajednice], Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Serbia. In 2013 the study was supported by the Provincial Department for Gender Equality [Pokrajinski sekretarijat za ravnopravnost] and the Office for Youth of the city of Novi Sad [Kancelarija za mlade Grada Novog Sada].

Furthermore, future research would more specifically investigate how CLA affects children's learning processes and attitudes towards traditional and retold stories.

5. Pilot project's findings and conclusions

Educators have grappled with the question of what is to be done with inherited curriculum materials (i.e. stories from the past) which indirectly promote out-dated and detrimental social values. Some have suggested that in light of the wealth of excellent new material now available some old material should be 'removed' and should not have a place in 'public and school libraries' [52]. This is perhaps more easily done in some contexts[4] but is extremely hard even to imagine in the contemporary Serbian context. Removing the 'Kosovo Cycle' (Kosovski ciklus) – the corpus of Serbian epic poetry about the historical 1389 Battle of Kosovo – would be equivalent to removing Shakespearean texts and narratives from the Anglosphere because of their dominator-based elements. Rather, in the context of alternative partnership-based approaches in education, such a strategy is not only unnecessary but those (various forms of violence-promoting) texts can instead be used as a resource. Writes Riane Eisler about the dominator-to-partnership paradigm shift in education:

I am certainly not suggesting that Shakespeare's works and others taught as classics be removed from the curriculum. These works are not only of great literary interest; they are also important resources for tracing the history of gender assumptions and other values that impact students' lives today. Indeed, looking at Shakespeare's plays through the dominator and partnership lenses makes it possible for students to see how works that present these kinds of relations between women and men as 'just the way things are' mirror, and reinforce, a male-dominated social order [30].

Retelling of the traditional/classic, widely known stories has a number of benefits as far as facilitating the emergence of alternative, socially inclusive and progressive futures goes. Through the retelling of familiar stories several goals are achieved:

1. Implicit critique of less desirable ways of behaving and communicating.
2. Explicit description of desirable ways of behaving and communicating – educating about available alternatives.
3. Promotion of critical literacy amongst children (i.e. how to make informed choices between alternative ways of behaving and communicating with others).
4. Promotion of dialogue.
5. Inspiring creativity – children writing their own stories and narratives (through the written word, drama or art).

In light of these findings, here are some brief descriptions of key elements of classic and rewritten stories that were offered as material for dialogue in the project:

Classic stories	Retold stories
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: an example of hostile relationships between older and younger women; the key metaphor is vocalised by the Queen of Hearts: 'off with their heads'	*Peaceful Wonderland*: peace instead of violence, cooperation, practical conflict resolution strategies
Cinderella: passivity, violence, poverty, punishment; another example of the conflict between older and younger woman spurred by envy, which is present in the majority of traditional stories	*Cinderella's Alchemy*: entrepreneurship, ecology, cooperation, positive role models, gender partnership (older woman as a mentor to the younger one), forgiveness
Mala princeza (*Little Princess*, traditional poem in Serbian): girls as beauty objects; desire of girls to be princesses within dominant cultural frameworks of what constitutes 'beauty'	*Jedna mala princeza* (*One Little Princess*): dealing with ethnically and racially based bullying, supporting differences, developing resilience, removing stereotypes and providing positive role models in literature for marginalised (Romani) people
Zidanje Skadra (*The Building of Skadar*, traditional poem from the Kosovo Cycle): violence against women, victimisation of women, disloyalty and dishonesty	*Slobodankino Zidanje Skadra* & *Zidanje Skadra i vila Zagorka* (*Freedom's Building of Skadar* & *Building of Skadar and Fairy Greenleaf*) (two retold versions of the same classic poem): women's political and economic power, power through education, supportive family relationships, women entrepreneurs, alternative, nonviolent masculinities, ecological awareness
Red Riding Hood: passivity, naivety, violence	*Red Riding Hood and the Castle of Wolves:* freeing from trafficking, resistance, cooperation, environmental education – positive treatment of animals
Kosovka devojka (*The Girl from Kosovo*), *Smrt Majke Jugovica* (*Death of the Mother of the Yugovici Princes*): ethnic conflict, violent conflict resolution, traditional gender roles – warrior vs. mother (or nurse) binarism, politics of victimhood, promotion of women's martyrdom	*The Girl from Kosovo and Kadira from Smyrna* & *The Girl from Kosovo and the Life of the Mother of the Yugovic Princes* (two retold versions of classic stories): peace movement, nonviolent masculinities, cooperation among women and ethnic communities, dealing with trauma – utilising it for a higher good

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[4] For example, Moorcroft writes in the context of modern Australia and the existence of blatantly racist texts and discourses on Indigenous people in mainstream educational histories.

Like the above-described ones, several other retold stories dealt with: removal of gender and cultural stereotypes with the introduction of 'an element of a surprise' within a familiar story line; offering new and positive gender roles and models; offering peaceful resolution to conflicts and alternatives to discrimination and violence. By and large, the retold stories dealt with some current issues faced by local Serbian society, as well as with the current and emerging 'global problematique.' Therefore, problems such as parental divorce, peer-based violence in schools and ecological damage are also addressed. In essence, the retold stories use familiar plots and storylines to address contemporary and futures issues, facilitating young people's own proposal of a multitude of alternative solutions and futures.

Overall evaluations have shown that the participants enjoyed the workshop format and the opportunity to engage with old and new narratives. Evaluation was conducted by a variety of instruments, including the use of more traditional instruments such as questionnaires and more contemporary instruments such as group discussions via social media. Oral feedback by participants was also written down, especially the feedback by trainers and teachers based on their observation of children's involvement. Concretely, two formal questionnaires were distributed. One formal questionnaire was given to education students who conducted workshops by the Think Center who coordinated it. All in all 32 students participated and 26 students gave written feedback to the following questions:

1. On a scale from 1 to 5 please give your overall impression about the project and reasons for your impression.
2. Which part of the project was most enjoyable and which one the least? Why?
3. Do you feel well equipped to lead the project after the training you have received?
4. What are your impressions about the training received?
5. Would you participate again in similar projects?
6. Your recommendations, comments and suggestions.

All 26 education students indicated that they were very pleased with workshops but still expressed a considerable dose of anxiety in terms of their readiness to work with children. Fifteen or 39% of the students stated that they felt completely ready to work with children whilst eleven or 28% stated that they did not feel ready or that they were unsure about themselves. However, these eleven respondents also indicated that this is not related to the specific training they received to conduct workshops but mostly due to their lack of experience in working with children in general. Practical component of pre-service work is still largely absent from Serbian universities, that is, there is no particular pre-service training organised by the university which focuses exclusively on transferring of academic knowledge. The workshop then served an additional purpose of providing students with invaluable experience in working with schools and with children. Further to this, discussions about CLA – deconstruction and reconstruction – the importance of providing alternatives, the role of gender stereotypes in folklore, the importance of storytelling and so on, were all new to these students. Still, after the workshops were over these students expressed both their satisfaction and excitement with the project, their role in them and their interaction with children in both the questionnaire as well as on a closed-group Facebook page. For example[5]:

> 'We just came back from the workshop and we would like to say that the children were great! They surprised us with their thoughts and observations; they were really ready for conversation and cooperation. They were lively but they listened to us and participated enthusiastically. . . . One little girl said that she was happy Cinderella did not marry the prince in the retold version because 'it is not good to marry somebody just because he is rich, you should merry the person you truly love', and one boy said that Cinderella left her home (in the retold version) because 'she was not respected' (by her step-mother and step-sisters).'

> 'We just conducted our first workshop. We were positively surprised with how much children were talkative and creative. Some of them were rather hyperactive but still most importantly we easily established the dialogue with them . . . They understood that in addition to the physical there is also psychological violence . . . They agreed that evil step-mother should not be killed . . . Although a couple of children also gave suggestion that 'she should be buried alive' or 'roasted on a barbeque'. . .'

> 'Today we had a workshop . . . children are truly wonderful and so intelligent. They created stories about various adventures; very creative . . . They gave some very good ecological ideas . . . addressed a question of whether boys and girls could do the same work. . . They liked the new Cinderella because she was courageous, persistent, hard-working, self-confident and because she did not passively tolerate torment but did something about it. If they were in Cinderella's place they would have made the step-mother do some work, to see what hard work is like. They were saying all sorts of things, very talkative and active, we had a great time. We even had two boys who created a dance related to the topic as they are training in hip-hop.'

> 'Children came up with all sorts of ideas. . . They had their own versions of Red Riding Hood which had some very peculiar bits. . . dinosaurs, tanks and machine guns but also peace offerings. Some children started drawing and will bring completed drawings and paintings for the next workshop. They loved the beginning of the retold Red Riding Hood and can't wait to hear the rest of the story next time!'

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[5] From the pre-service education students' feedbacks. Questionnaire by the Think Center and Facebook page entries.

'We put bits and pieces from stories on small papers and asked children to start and finish as they like... They gave many interesting ideas such as Rapunzel doing push-ups to be able to free herself from the tower ... and one of the princesses in the story even became a great tennis trainer, so good, in fact, that she started training Novak Đoković.[6]'

Students' feedback confirms other findings from the literature that when the children are given the opportunity to become active meaning-makers they embrace it with enthusiasm. Whilst the conventional approach to folk literature is almost exclusively via rote learning, workshops wherein old and new retold stories were compared gave students 'a licence' to do the same through their own creative work. As a result, a lively and joyful atmosphere was created wherein children participated enthusiastically.[7]

The second formal questionnaire was given to the teachers who participated in the project with their classes (consisting of some 30 children each). This evaluation was conducted by the Provincial Department for Gender Equality which co-funded a section of the project. The evaluation targeted three main groups: (1) education students who conducted workshops; (2) children who participated; and (3) teachers. Education students were asked three groups of questions: those related to acquired knowledge, views about the project and readiness for further similar work with children. In addition to their questionnaire, an official from the Department attended workshops in seven schools to directly observe activities by the education students who coordinated workshops with children in schools. The second evaluation investigated the impact of workshops and project on the children who participated and used structured interview with 32 children from five primary schools who participated in workshops. Schools were randomly chosen while children volunteered to be interviewed. The last questionnaire investigated the impact of the project as seen by the teachers who completed the questionnaire after the last workshop. The questionnaire asked if the teachers were satisfied with various aspects of the project, their understanding of topics in question and their readiness and initiative for further acting after completion of workshops. All in all 13 teachers returned the questionnaire.

The teachers mostly enjoyed the workshop techniques (play, drama, discussion, art) and the actual topics that were discussed. Their feedback confirmed research findings about the value of an indirect approach in dealing with the topics in question. In their feedback the teachers stressed that with this (indirect, respectful, flexible and accessible) method of teaching they were better able to 'teach students critical thinking, independent decision making as well as meta cognition.'[8] In their feedback, they also stated that new retold stories encouraged the children to 'start thinking for themselves, gain new knowledge and skills and enable them to see their own problems in a clearer way'[9] (and from different angles). A majority of the teachers, ten or 77%,[10] who participated in the pilot project stated that they would continue using retold stories and other methods and ideas which were used in the workshops. Teachers and parents, educated in a top-down/rote learning-based system in the former Yugoslavia, were therefore secondary beneficiaries of the project, as they did not have the opportunity to participate in such workshops themselves when young.

The students of education, who conducted the workshops, also spoke about first and second tier positive consequences from the project. Even though it was the primary school students who were the principal research/project target, the university students also 'enjoyed [the] stories written by the children, their creativity, high level of engagement, novel thinking and observations of [the] issues discussed.'[11] This experience for the education students increases in significance when we have in mind the fact that these students will, in only a year's time, be employed as primary school teachers and counsellors. Many of them were for the first time given an opportunity to discuss master narratives that they were made to learn by heart in school and to examine the ways the cultural patterns embedded in these narratives continue to influence political and cultural life in Serbia today. They realised that deep culture plays a significant role in the creation of national identity and of the dominant discourses upon which the nation as a social construction rests. Homi Bhabha contends that the nation is a system of cultural signification and in order to deconstruct the nation as a form of narrative (its 'textual strategies, metaphoric displacement, sub-texts and figurative statements') we need to look into the texts that constitute it [53]. Once they were acquainted with the idea of nation as *narration*, the students became interested in the texts which move away from nationalism by bringing into the foreground varied socio-historical contexts, reshaped myths and oral histories. This is especially relevant in a country like Serbia which has recently experienced civil wars and totalitarianism. When we discussed the retold stories with the teachers and university students, we realised that as members of generations who were born in Yugoslavia and witnessed the disintegration of their country, civil wars, airstrikes and rampant inflation and poverty, they are keenly aware of the importance of presentation and representation. They are especially interested in the ways master texts can be reshaped or replaced since they have observed the instability of such master texts. The teachers and some mature-age students grew up learning stories about the Partisan Army and its fight against Nazi occupation which were favoured by the Yugoslav Communist Party, only to see these stories discarded and replaced by epic poems, from the Kosovo Cycle, which celebrate Serbian heroes who fought against the Ottoman Empire favoured by Milošević's right wing nationalist

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[6] World top ranking tennis player who is from Serbia.
[7] Feedback by education students who conducted workshops, in the questionnaire as well as on the Facebook page.
[8] From the teachers' feedback, Questionnaire by the Provincial Department for Gender Equality.
[9] From the teachers' feedback, Questionnaire by the Provincial Department for Gender Equality.
[10] The rest, or 23% (a total of three), did not answer this question. Questionnaire by the Provincial Department for Gender Equality.
[11] From the feedback of the university students who conducted the workshops in the schools. Questionnaire by the Provincial Department for Gender Equality.

party. Current university students, as well, grew up in times of shifting narratives and power battles over them. Moreover, people in Serbia are daily reminded that the recent painful history of the former-Yugoslav region is still subject to different interpretations. It was therefore a challenge to the students to develop a critical approach and to examine the link between history and narration. As has already been stated above, the goal, however, was not the replacement of master narratives such as the Kosovo Cycle, since they are an integral part of Serbian culture, but reading them critically so that the students would be able to recognise underlying structures and metaphors, envision alternatives, and understand that these are social constructions and, as such, that they are subject to change, rather than being inexorable.

The support given to the project by the state and provincial institutions testifies to the need for such interventions in the Serbian education system. It also reflects the fact that lack of funding is not the only impediment; more often it is a lack of trained educators and insufficient awareness of the existence of alternative methods. The out-dated curriculum in primary, high school and university education barely contains any elements of gender equality. Thus it is possible that the future educators who were participants in the project, who will graduate from the Department of Pedagogy, did not have any courses in gender, peace or future studies in their own education. Upon completion of the project, all of the students declared that they would recommend participation in the project to their colleagues since it gave them the tools to approach education from a different angle. They understood that the power of retold stories comes from the diversity of voices, the coexistence of different characters and the cultures they belong to. The participants also gave suggestions regarding the continuation of the project in future and improvement of some aspects of the project–discussion on that is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Of course, there was a number of 'resisters' as well, participants (including children) who said they did not like that familiar stories were 'fiddled with', preferring to stay with certainty and the known. For example:

> I am missing the part where Cinderella marries the Prince. The story would finish more beautifully if she married him.[12]

> Everything was good. But I would still change something [in the retold stories]. Cinderella should have married first and only then she should look for work.

> I did not like the changes in the retold story. The story changed too much. Because Cinderella did not marry the Prince.

> I did not like to have poor children in the stories because I feel sorry for them.

> Old fairy-tales are better because girls marry straight away and have the family... they could find work later; that will be easy.

> I do not want Romani people in stories.[13] I want everybody to be the same, neither too rich nor too poor.

> I like old stories better because I am used to them.

Towards the conclusion we would like to bring in some statements and suggestions by the primary school students (ages 8–10) who participated in this project:

> I like the different version of Red Riding Hood, it was fun. We connected the stories and together invented different endings.

> I love fairy tales so that is why I enjoyed all of this process. I especially love the new fairy tales which were changed a bit.

> I enjoyed the workshops because we could make our own stories that we liked.

> What I really liked is that we could be honest and no one laughed at us.

> I am glad that through these workshops we helped some of our classmates who are usually quite reluctant to speak up.

> I liked the workshops because I learned something new and useful.

> The new stories have different endings, and beginnings; they are full of imagination and more fun.

> I learned that we should not allow other people to control us and give orders. We need to move away from what bothers us and find what is better for each one of us.

> It isn't important if children are black or white, what is important is that they are good friends.

> It is good that in the new stories girls know how to defend themselves.

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[12] In the retold version Cinderella still marries but not the Prince. She marries Zlatan, a colleague she works with as she falls in love with him and also does not want to spend her life idle, even if surrounded with incredible wealth.

[13] This refers to *Jedna mala princeza* (*One Little Princess*) a retold poem which deals with ethnic and racially based bullying; the new poem intends to support differences, develop resilience, remove stereotypes and provide positive role models in literature for marginalised (Romani) people.

We learned that women have their rights and everybody should believe in them.[14]

From the children's answers we can see that, although at an early age, they are capable of perceiving differences between traditional and retold stories and the morals they teach. Twenty seven or 84% of children[15] stated that they liked the new stories, the workshops in which they were used and what they learned from the stories. Just as working with retold stories helped the students to understand how they can foster social change, young children understood that in traditional tales women are passive and victimised and that characters resort to violence to solve their problems. Retold stories, in the children's opinion, teach them that women have rights that need to be respected, that, in the words of one child, they 'can be heroes'.[16] Similarly, the focus on peace education and equality in the retold stories enabled children to realise the importance of cooperation and resolution of conflicts. Thus twenty-three or 72% of children stated that the retold stories taught them to value friendship, to avoid being judgemental ("do not judge the book by its cover" as one child put it) and to respect everybody's rights (most children gave the examples of women and Romani people as groups whose rights are not sufficiently respected). Finally the children told the writers that they wanted 'more modern stories' such as these.[17]

All this is critically important if qualitatively different and positive, partnership-based futures are our collective goal. As some readers of the book on which the project was based stated[18]:

> Whilst reading these new stories I kept on thinking about a motto: 'Another world is possible'... in our heads, to start with... It is books [with new stories] like these that inspire us to create new values, relationships and ideas...
> I like the book especially because it gives children a possibility to find out that there are also other worlds and other versions of stories, and not only one common pattern of gender relations.

As futurists, and peace educator Elise Boulding, have repeatedly argued [54], it is the lack of imagination about what alternative peace-oriented futures would actually look like that perpetuates conventional thinking about the (individual and collective) futures. By using stories to discuss often controversial, emotionally laden and difficult topics in post-conflict societies, the partnership education approaches used in the project succeeded in opening up new spaces for transformative futures in a non-threatening way. It is, of course, early days to comment on any longer-term benefits of the *Storytelling for Peace, Gender Partnership and Cultural Pluralism* project. As with many other ad hoc, temporary and limited initiatives, it is hard to imagine that a pilot project such as this would facilitate significant changes, even in the schools in which it was directly implemented. However, at the very least, some new seeds enabling different thinking about individual and social futures have been planted amongst several hundred young people, the creators of their own futures as well as the futures of our societies.

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