

TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM  
TITLE VIII COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM

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*Changing Geographies of Childhood in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina*  
*February 1, 2019 – August 31, 2019*  
Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina

**Research Abstract:**

This research explores how children's geographies and the geographies of childhood more generally are changing in relation to local, national, and international forces. Specifically, I am interested in how middle-school-aged children's everyday geographies and expectations for the future are shaped by the residential mobility (or immobility) of others in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina. I use the term 'everyday geographies' to underline the spatial patterning of embodied and relational practices in daily life. By paying attention to how, when, and why children occupy specific places and spaces, I aim to gain a better understanding of how they rework routines of everyday mobility in response to changing circumstances related to international mobility – including changes to local demographics, the ongoing emigration of family, friends, and community members, the transient migration of non-Bosnian nationals through Bihać, and their own prospective emigration. Working with a group of middle-school aged children for a period of more than six months, this research incorporated a broad range of methods including participatory mapmaking, written narrative solicitation, semi-structured interviews, and group discussions. Interviews were also conducted with the parents of child participants and with other adults, who either resided in Bihać as children or were the parents or grandparents of a child who currently lives in Bihać.

**Research Goals:**

My research project sought to understand how changing geographies of childhood in Bihać are lived, narrated, and contested by children and adults. Through an examination of children's mobility, this project explored the transformation of social welfare and public space infrastructure, its meaning and relation to constructions of childhood in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Due to the evolution of events in Bihać since writing my original research proposal – the emergence of Bihać as a major site of migration by non-Bosnian nationals en route to the European Union, and the accelerating rate of local emigration to the European Union – the focus of my research shifted to accommodate these changing circumstances. This research remained primarily concerned with the experiential geographies of children in Bihać. However, due to the growing influences of international migration (both already occurring and prospective), which were evident in preliminary interviews on childhood in Bihać, it became important to expand the focus of this research to give appropriate weight to these influences.

The objectives of this research were to (1) document where children spent their time, (2) collect narratives from children and adult caregivers about why their spatial realms are demarcated the way they are, (3) contextualize these narratives within broader social, political, and economic forces, and (4) provide support for participating children to work collectively to voice their unmet spatial needs and aspirations.

**Research Activities:**

Having received prior permission from the Ministry of Education, I conducted activities with children in an elementary school in Bihać during the Spring semester. I

worked with children from four classes (one third grade class, one fourth grade class, and two fifth grade classes). Research activities occurred approximately once per week or two weeks dependent on the school schedule. After introducing myself and the goals and planned research activities to each class, parental consent forms and child assent forms were sent home with students. Forty-three students received signed parental consent and chose to participate: sixteen third graders, nine fourth graders, and eighteen fifth graders. By the end of the semester, thirty-six students remained regular participants: twelve third graders, nine fourth graders, and fifteen fifth graders. A primary challenge of the in-school research component of this project was the need for constant adaptation to teachers' changing schedules and to the changing availability of space for conducting the research activities. I was able to conduct the activities in an unused classroom until early May. However, the conversion of that space into a new kindergarten classroom required mapping activities to be conducted outside, in the schoolyard, a move that involved some adjustment, but did not derail progress.

The primary school-based research activity was the production by child participants of both local and global socio-spatial network maps (see Figures 1 and 2). Each child produced maps that visually depict the social networks of people that the participant regarded as important to them, including family members and friends. The people that the participants identified were written on squares (red for family, yellow for friends) and grouped into households. On the local maps, the participants drew and labeled places where they went to socialize and, then, used string to connect the people that they regularly meet at these places as well as which people go to each others' households. On the global maps, each participant sorted their identified people into the

cities and then the countries in which they live. Participants were also given the option to add green squares for famous people, such as athletes, actors, singers, or You-tubers, whom they followed and felt 'connected to' to in some way. These maps are in most cases quite detailed, providing a wealth of information about the breadth and location of each child participant's social spheres.

I conducted more intensive interviews with seventeen child participants. These semi-structured interviews used the socio-spatial network maps that each child created as a basis from which to discuss their perspectives on their own local mobility, public space infrastructure, adult responsiveness to their perspectives, current effects of the presence of non-Bosnians in Bihać, other people's emigration from Bihać, their own potential emigration, their access to communication technology, and extracurricular activities, among other things. A series of written narrative solicitation exercises were also conducted to provide another way by which the child participants could express their perspectives on these topics.

Following the end of the school term, I invited a subset of child participants to continue participating in research activities over the summer. All of the fourth and fifth grade participants were invited to join in research activities twice per week throughout the summer break, and four participants from the third grade were separately invited to participate one day per week. The American Corner in Bihać generously allowed me to use that space to meet with the children. During this period of research, the fourth and fifth grade participants created individual spatial range maps and a group map of Bihać. They also participated in recorded individual interviews and group discussions. The third

grade participants also created individual spatial range maps and participated in recorded individual interviews and group discussions.

For creation of the individual spatial range maps, each child was given a base map of Bihać and, guided by aerial images, explained to me where they are allowed to walk or ride a bike without direct adult supervision, detailing when, why, and with who they were allowed in or restricted from certain places. Stickers and markers were used to mark significant places and routes on each participant's base map.

For the group map, which used a 1.6 m<sup>2</sup> base map, the participants used stickers to mark places that they used to orient themselves in navigation, places that they see trash, places that they see street dogs, places that they see violence, places that they see children, and places that they heard things said that make them uncomfortable. The finished group map enabled us to collectively identify 'hot spots' for each of these things. This map revealed that the main places where these events occurred were the schoolyard and a local playground.

From discussions and written answers it became clear that an issue that the child participants collectively felt most strongly about was litter in public spaces. I worked with the children to create a concrete plan for responding to this issue and supported them in planning cleanup actions at the local playground, which had been identified as a major problem. Three informal cleaning days were held, and the children decided to organize a larger community-wide cleaning action for the playground. They publicized the event through a flyer (see Figure 3) and word of mouth. The children's flyer hanging activity proved to be successful in drawing a large crowd of adults and other children to the

community cleaning action, and it even received positive coverage in the local television media.

Following the success of the public cleanup action, I supported the children in their efforts to form their own club focused on the continuing stewardship of local public spaces in which they congregate, with a particular emphasis on the playground. We discussed possible membership and governance structures, and the children decided to elect co-presidents and a treasurer, and to collect a nominal membership contribution to fund their efforts. Mirela Midzić, the director of the American Corner in Bihać, agreed to allow the children to continue to meet in that space.

Coordinating summer research activities was difficult because many of the participants went away for periods of time for vacation. However, the difficulty that this posed for conducting research during the summer months was greatly ameliorated by the ease with which the participants related to me – and the research – when removed from the context of school. The rigidity of the curriculum and expected modes of behavior that the child participants associated with the school building seemed to constrain their ability to confidently express critiques of their lived experiences. This barrier was significantly eroded when the research stopped being a school-based activity and moved to different spaces.

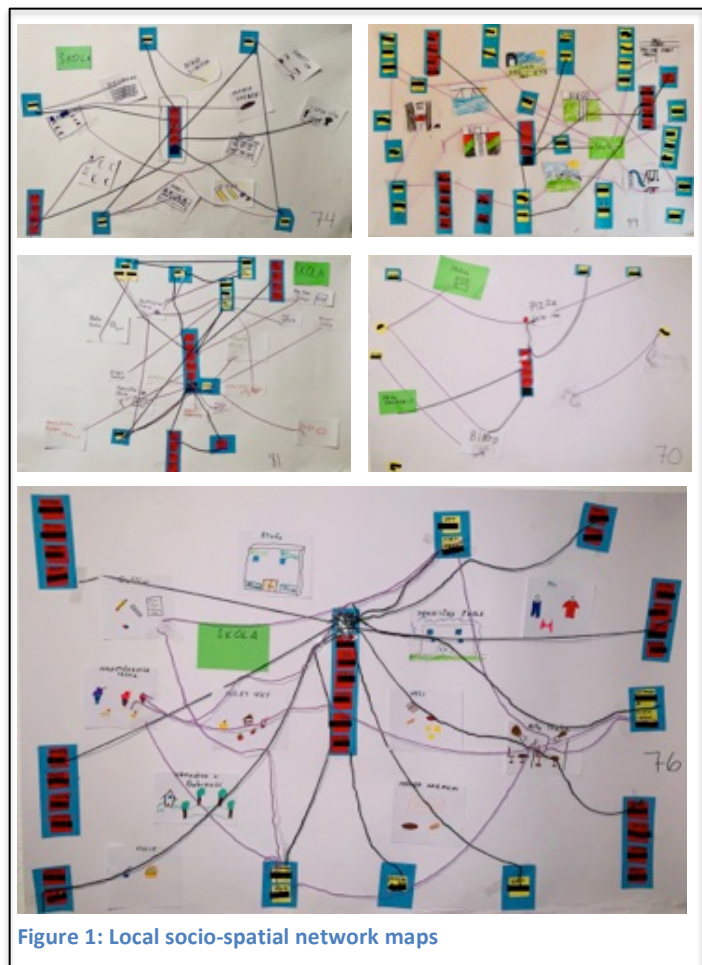
During the summer, I also conducted interviews with the parents of the summer research participants. Thirteen parent interviews (fifteen parents of fourteen children) were conducted. These interviews allowed me to gain insight into parental perspectives on their children's lives (including spatial roaming, technology access and usage,

schooling, and public infrastructure impacts), temporal changes regarding childhood in Bihać, possible future emigration, and current effects of the presence of non-Bosnians in Bihać on parenting decisions, and other topics.

I also conducted several interviews with adults who had lived in Bihać as children and/or who had children or grandchildren currently living in Bihać (but were not among the children in the child participant group). These interviews, like pre-dissertation interviews that I carried out in Bihać in October 2018, will enable me to analyze the temporal as well as the spatial dimensions of the changing structure of children's geographies in Bihać.

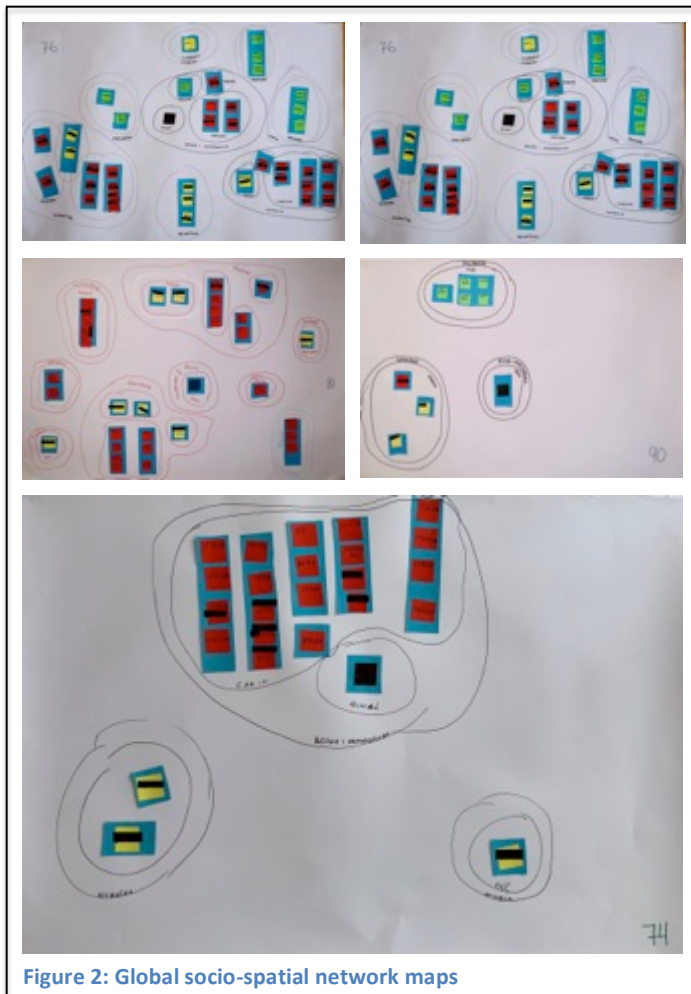
### **Important Research Findings:**

Given the large amount of data that I was able to collect, I remain in the very early stages of analysis. However, some initial findings have emerged from this research. A primary finding is that broader patterns of international migration do indeed affect the everyday geographies of middle-school aged children in Bihać. This was particularly evident in children's discussions about 'migrants.'



It is also evident from parent interviews that while employment prospects are a significant consideration in decisions about whether to emigrate, other factors more directly related to the perceived quality of their children's lives, both current and future, also contribute strongly to these decisions. What was clear was that the decision to emigrate was not only based on employment, but also the quality of public infrastructure and public space.

Children often said that they did not have specific parameters laid out for where they are allowed to go or not go alone or in the company of friends or siblings, like



borders on a map; rather, there were specific routes along which they felt most comfortable traveling, and specific places that they were allowed to travel to at specific times, depending on the purpose of their being there. Although, in general, present spatial range correlated with age, many children expressed that they had previously had more expansive ranges, but that the increasing presence of 'strangers' (migrants attempting to enter the EU byway of Bosnia) over the



past year had resulted in a contraction of these ranges. This perception was corroborated by parent interviews.

Interestingly, when information from the spatial range maps and child interviews was cross-referenced with information collected through interviews with each child's parent(s), it became clear that each child's level of anxiety about the presence of 'strangers/refugees/migrants' largely mirrored those expressed by their parent(s).



Figure 3: Flyer publicizing the public cleaning action of the playground

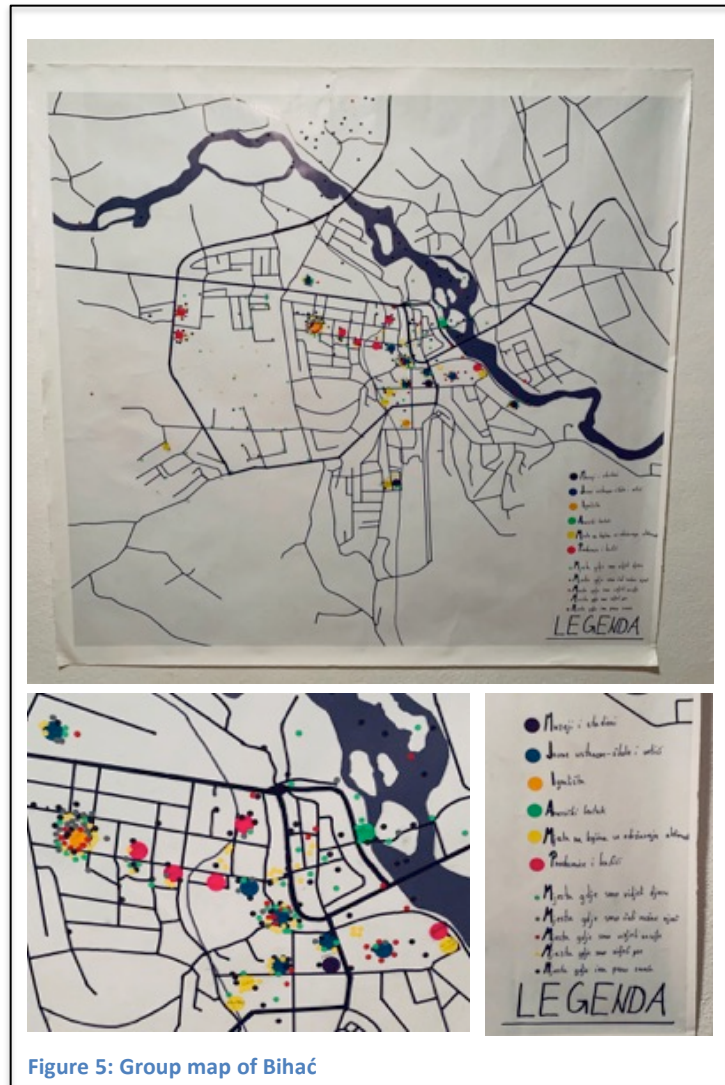
The creation of the group map of Bihać (see Figure 5) provided visual clarity regarding locations in which the participants collectively experienced the presence of issues such as trash, violent events, discomfoting language, and stray dogs. The two



Figure 4: Page from presentation given by child participants to the mayor's advisor

locations with the greatest density of dots representing these factors were also the places which participants labeled as those where they usually could find other children: the local

playground and their schoolyard. Through further discussion, it became clear that while some red dots (marking violent events) were meant to signify well-known events of serious violence that were not directly experienced by the participants (such as the stabbing of one non-Bosnian national by another in the City Park), most of these dots, including those placed at the playground and in the schoolyard, represented first-



person experiences of acts of aggression from other (usually older) children.

Children also worked collectively to form a plan for the redesign of the playground where they carried out community cleanup activities, and presented this plan, along with their observations and expectations for improvement of public space, to the mayor's advisor.

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations:**

The USAID *County Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2012-2020* lays out the overall goals, development objectives, and

intermediate results that the United States hopes to achieve in cooperation with BiH. A common theme running through all of this document's governance objectives is an "increasing engagement between citizens and government at all levels and encouraging activism to make governments more transparent and accountable" (25). This project's preliminary findings suggest several policy implications and recommendations for further consideration.

- Many parents mentioned quality of life factors when describing their decisions about emigrating, and specifically cited the quality of public spaces and play and recreation areas in other countries as reasons for emigration. Embassy-funded support for BiH should include projects that not only improve public space but also afford opportunities for public participation in decisions about land-use.

**Embassy-funded programming should reflect the needs of families with school-aged children.**

- The children proved to be competent stewards of the public spaces that they utilize. However, they required the support of a perceived authority figure before they felt comfortable organizing to cleanup the playground. **Embassy-funded programs should explore ways to encourage and normalize children's involvement in and leadership of projects that support public space.**

#### **Co-Curricular Activity:**

In May I gave an invited lecture at the University of Bihać Pedagogical Faculty to an audience comprised of both English-language undergrads and Early Childhood Education students. This presentation provided an overview of my research questions, methodology, and examples of socio-spatial network maps that the children had

produced, along with initial avenues for analysis. A meeting with Dr. Mersina Mujagić, who moderated this lecture, was helpful in contextualizing the students' responses to the lecture.

The opportunity to meet with two anthropologists, Dr. Azra Homradzić and Dr. David Henig, who were each in Bihać conducting their own research, enabled me to learn more about their own field research experiences. I have been heavily influenced by Dr. Homradzić's writing, so it was wonderful to have been able to connect with her.

I was fortunate to be given access to space in the American Corner in Bihać in which to conduct the summer research activities with children, and thus had frequent contact with its director, Mirela Midzić. The Mayor's advisor, Edin Moranjkić, provided insight into the local politics surrounding public space development, maintenance, and financing, and attended a session in August at the American Corner to listen to and engage with several of the child participants. The children expressed their concerns about the conditions of their local environment and presented the Mayor's advisor with a proposal for public space improvement, including plans for the renovation of their playground. Sejad Hambasić, the president of the local community, provided context for the historical development of the playground, and described recent efforts to have it renovated.

### **Conclusions:**

Children in Bihać care deeply about their surroundings and are knowledgeable about their environments. But children are not often involved in making decisions about public space. They are rarely involved in decision-making processes (whether externally or locally led) whose outcomes affect their daily lives. This project has shown that when

space is opened up to afford opportunities to participate in civic life, children are eager and active participants in collective projects around public space.

Children's local and global socio-spatial network maps not only show those spaces where they are most invested and active, they also reveal that children's perceptions of their of their own most familiar spaces are understood in relation to much wider, world-wrapping networks. In this way, children's understandings of Bihać are much like their parents and draw on comparisons with other places elsewhere. The main purpose of this research has been to situate children's geographies and mobilities within wider political economies of movement and mobility. However, understanding how children's perspectives on these issues relate to adults' concerns is crucial for understanding the needs of both school aged children and their parents.

#### **Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:**

Following a period of intensive analysis, I plan to return to Bihać in late spring of next year to conduct follow-up interviews with child participants, parents, and local officials. During my return, I plan work with the local public art gallery on an exhibition displaying the maps of Bihać created as part of this research by the child participants in order to more widely disseminate their perspectives and concerns.

It is my intention to submit a report on my research findings (in Bosnian) to the Una Sana Canton's Ministry of Education, in fulfillment of a requirement for having received permission to conduct this research in a school. A version of this report (in English) will also be made available to the US Embassy in Bosnia, and submitted (in English and Bosnian) to the journal *Post Scriptom*, published by the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Bihać.

I hope to present on this research at next year's American Association of Geographers Conference, Royal Geographical Society Conference, and at the CUNY Graduate Center's Annual Psychology Research Day. While writing my dissertation, I plan to simultaneously prepare at least one article for submission to the academic journal *Children's Geographies*.

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