

Enhancing the awareness of emotions through art and drama among crisis-affected Syrian refugee children in southeast Turkey

Necile Ş. Gürle

MA Social Sciences, Istanbul University, Education Officer in Concern Worldwide, Turkey

Abstract

By learning to identify feelings and express emotions, children can better cope with the difficulties they face, as well as increase their personal resilience. As the Syrian crisis has entered its seventh year, it has had a negative effect on vulnerable populations, especially children. It should be noted that while not all children have been traumatised, many have experienced conflict and crisis, and in turn face challenges expressing and regulating their emotions and behaviour. The aim of the small study, described in this field report, is to explore the power of using drama and art as tools for Syrian children to help them learn to identify their emotions. The qualitative study was conducted at an informal education centre in southeast Turkey, with 10 children, over the course of five workshops. Basic drama and creative art skills were used to raise awareness about emotions as the first phase of emotion regulation.

Keywords: Creativity, crisis-affected children, drama, emotion regulation

INTRODUCTION: STRESSORS IMPACTING REFUGEE CHILDREN

Refugee children often face challenges resulting from experiencing crisis and/or from their living conditions in a host country. During displacement, stressors for children and family members include separation from friends, family members and neighbours; the loss of loved ones; and the absence of resources to meet basic needs. Many children have been unable to continue their education due to challenges such as enrolling in school, poverty, health issues or social tension with host community children. Children are also often forced to work and may be exposed to violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015). Moreover, during crisis and conflict, children may be forced by circumstance to grow up quickly. In turn, some children may perceive themselves as adults, leading them to lose family protection and receive threats from outside the family (Schininà, 2017).

Family violence and parental stress, economic pressure and confinement to the home also affect children's distress. Sleeping, aggression, hyperactivity, speech problems and violent and war-affected play are also seen among crisis-affected children (UNHCR, 2015). As a result of the potential exposure to the stress factors listed above, children may present evidence of instability and demonstrate

aggression through their emotions. Children who have not received the necessary emotional support may also exhibit anxiety, anger and distress when dealing with difficult situations. Kaplan, Stolk, Valibhoy, Tucker, and Baker (2016, p. 86) explain: 'children may suffer from disruption of emotion and cognition followed by a poor sense of inner agency'.

Emotion regulation

Therefore, due to the nature of ongoing crises such as the Syrian crisis, obstacles may arise for children regarding their expression of emotion. Emotions are a part of the richness of life, but at times can be overwhelming or out of control. Having knowledge regarding emotion regulation will help children to be mindful of their own emotions and the needs of people within their communities. Children will feel confident and calm. They will be able to overcome distractions and have better relationships with their peers and caregivers. Through an acceptance of all emotions and responding to them in a constructive way, children are then

Address for correspondence: Ms. Necile Şule Gürle, Kalamış Fener cad. Körfez yolu sok. Körfez apt. D.1 No.3 Kadıköy/Istanbul, Turkey.
E-mail: sulegurle@yahoo.com

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better able to build strong relationships with others (Hooker & Fooder, 2008).

The term '*emotion regulation*' is defined as a person's ability to effectively manage and respond to an emotional experience (Rolston & Lloyd-Richardson, 2016). Emotion regulation is related to being aware of, identifying, labelling, managing and balancing emotions. According to Broderick (2017), infants are not born with the ability to regulate emotion, but rather it is learned and constantly developed throughout childhood. Although childhood is important for establishing emotion regulation, it continues to develop through adolescence.

Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, and Robinson (2007) explain that many different factors, including personality and the process of psychological development, as well as parent/child attachment, influence the development of emotion regulation. According to Drury and Williams (2012), emotion regulation, parenting and social support are considered as the personal and social sources of resilience. Additionally, the way in which a family handles and copes with stress, as well as their socio-economic status, plays a significant role in the way children develop emotion regulation (Lipsett, 2011).

Secure attachment to a primary caregiver, which is established in the early years of a child's life, is crucial to the development of emotion regulation. Secure attachment takes place if the caregiver/parent is protective, responsive and available to the child. According to the Permanent Care and Adoptive Families Association (2013), the attachment is disrupted if the parent/caregiver is abusive, neglectful or absent, which adversely affects the development of the child and prevents them from acquiring emotion regulation.

Children can be taught to regulate their emotions by directly teaching them strategies, guiding them in relation to their experience of their emotions, helping them to label emotions and discussing coping strategies. Children should be encouraged to discuss their emotions during difficult situations, rather than keeping them to themselves. Children also need to understand the importance of sharing their feelings during both happy and unpleasant situations. Lipsett (2011), explains that interventions in preschool years and while transitioning to middle school are the most successful times for children to be taught about emotion regulation and notes that exploring ways to regulate emotions will support children's success in all aspects of their lives. According to Barish (2013, p. 1): '*any improvement in a child's emotion regulation will result in them paying more attention, working harder and achieving more in school, as well as having better skills in resolving conflicts with their peers and experiencing lower levels of stress, thus it is beneficial for all areas of their lives*'.

Resilience through art

It has been argued that refugees' response to adversity encompasses not only the trauma that they may experience, but also the consequent development of an activated

capacity and resilience. The way that children react to a crisis depends on their age, development and personality, as well as the way others interact with them. According to a United Nations Relief and Works Agency report (2013), most children will be resilient if their basic psychosocial needs are met through normal developmental activities such as education, recreation and play (70–80%). Some children may need additional support, such as talking to someone about their feelings regarding a difficult situation at home or participating in activities that help build coping mechanisms (20–25%). A few children may require specialised interventions due to loss, trauma or unresolved grief (less than 5%) (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the near east, 2013).

The resilience of crisis-affected children may also differ based on their experience, gender, age, secure attachment with caregivers and home environment. If a child's social and home environments are positive, they may be more resilient and more aware of their emotions and better able to manage them in a more constructive way. A number of possible coping mechanisms for children have been addressed (International Medical Corps [IMC], 2017, p. 7), including the following:

- Spending time with a caregiver with whom the child has secure attachment/relationship.
- Going back to school.
- Spending time with friends.
- Engaging in hobbies.
- Using media (watching television or listening to music).
- Sleeping.
- Language classes.
- Increased recreational activities.
- Socialising through engaging or playing with friends.

In addition to these mechanisms, art and drama can also have a significant impact on children's well-being and help them to develop the necessary capacity to identify their emotions. Through art and stories, children can relate their experiences without referring to them directly. Art and drama provide the child with tools that they can use to build resilience (Surrey Welcoming Communities Project, 2014). Hoffmann and Russ (2012) hypothesise that children with strong imaginations and creativity are more adaptable and have more emotion control. A child with a creative mind will be better able to think of responses, behaviours and/or actions that they can use to better handle their emotions when necessary. Gayler and Evans (2001) suggest that encouraging children to participate in social interaction, such as play and drama, improves their ability to successfully use emotion regulation. Techniques used in drama therapy, such as playing, storytelling and role play, all encourage children to verbally express themselves, which allows children to understand and control emotional experiences (Moneta & Rousseau, 2013). In the poem '*The Hundred Languages of Children*', Malaguzzi writes: '*the child has a hundred languages, a hundred hands, a hundred ways of thinking, of playing, of speaking*' (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1997, p. 3). If we want to work with children, especially crisis-affected children, we should, therefore, integrate play, self-expression and creativity into

their daily routines. So, with the aim of exploring the power of drama and art as tools to learn about emotion regulation, this field report focuses on a five-day art and drama workshop targeting Syrian refugee children living in south-east Turkey.

PROCEDURE AND METHODS

Participant profile

The aim of this field report was to record and highlight the use of art and drama as tools to mitigate the effects of conflict on small communities. For this reason, the target group of children was selected based on their status as refugees. Ten Syrian children (five girls and five boys) attending an informal education centre in southeast Turkey were selected to participate in a five-day workshop. The informal education centre aims to transition school aged, Syrian children living off camp into formal education through accelerated literacy programmes.

The children who participated were between the ages of 10 and 12 and came from both Arabic-and Kurdish-speaking families. With respect to the selection of the children, no specific selection criteria were applied, other than the children were all attendees at the education centre for refugees and had basic Arabic literacy skills, because some of the exercises/activities involved reading. It was not known if the children had any prior behavioural problems. The programme was discussed with the children's parents/guardians beforehand, and permission was sought in relation to the children's participation in the workshop. The parents/guardians did not participate in the workshop.

THE WORKSHOP

This workshop was designed for crisis-affected children with the intention of helping them discover and identify their senses and emotions, express themselves in a mindful way and improve their communication skills through drama and stories. These types of activities should ideally only be undertaken or conducted in relatively stable environments post-conflict, because a sense of safety and relative normality has been shown to be the most conducive for reflection and learning.

The workshop was implemented by one lead facilitator and two assistants, one Kurdish/Turkish speaker and one Arabic/Kurdish/English speaker, to provide translation support. Each session lasted approximately two hours. The sessions took place in the library of an informal education centre. Five sessions were conducted over the course of two weeks.

The workshop had two pillars: understanding senses (touch, smell, taste, vision and hearing) and understanding emotions. The workshop combined both verbal and non-verbal means of expression.

The workshop primarily employed drama techniques, such as storytelling and image theatre, which are described in detail below. During the workshop, each session started with a warm-up activity, a main exercise and a closure activity. During the main activity, creative art techniques

were used, including *safe-place-sequence activities* (Rappaport, 1998, p. 2), which allows children to create a safe place in their imagination by listening to a facilitator tell a story and helps to connect children with their emotions. Self-expression, sharing personal feelings through art and image brainstorming were used to encourage the children to use their imaginations and think about situations from different perspectives. The children also participated in body percussion (Body percussion is a method of using the body as a musical instrument. For example, someone can beat on their chest or legs, or clap their hands to make music.), energisers (For each session, the author used different energisers learnt through psychosocial support training by International Organization for Migration (IOM). Her plan, which includes many of these energisers, may be requested through the aforementioned correspondence address.), icebreakers, storytelling and breathing exercises during the workshop. At the end of each session, an evaluation was completed to check if the children had been engaged in the activities and felt comfortable. For the creative art session, the facilitator used Gürsoy Düzenli's '*Ama Ben Saçlarımı Seviyorum*' (Duzenli, 2017, I Love My Hair, Turkish language), an illustrated storybook that was read without showing the illustrations to the children; thereafter, the children were asked to draw what they heard.

SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF CREATIVE DRAMA TECHNIQUES

Drama used theatre techniques to facilitate personal growth and expression and to promote well-being. The techniques included improvisation, role play, puppetry, miming, masques and character work. In the workshops, the facilitator used various creative techniques that are described below.

The drama sessions included:

- Session 1: Self-introduction (name games and warm-ups) and introduction to basic image theatre (metaphor exercise).
- Session 2: Understanding of senses (brainstorming).
- Session 3: Understanding emotions (image brainstorming, spontaneous art).
- Session 4: Expressing emotions (image theatre).
- Session 5: Creative writing, safe-place-sequence activity and closure.

Metaphor exercise: An object, such a ball, was placed in the middle of the room; the children were supposed to imagine that the ball was a different object. Other objects were placed around the room, and children tried to see each object as something different than what it actually was, to activate their imaginations. Every child came to the circle and took turns showing the group through gestures what the object in their minds was. This activity encouraged children to use basic theatre skills without them realizing it and provided opportunities for children to represent their emotions.

Image theatre: Image theatre is a method of expression that avoids using words altogether. It uses the spontaneity offered by movement, body language, objects, gestures,

colours and visual signals that connect to our day-to-day perceptions (Opdebeeck, 2017). During the workshop, image theatre was used to explore emotions. Children were asked to walk around the room while music played in the background. The music was joyful and upbeat, something that they were not necessarily familiar with hearing, for example, the soundtrack from the film *Amelie*. The music was selected to ensure that it did not cause stress and encouraged them to be creative and upbeat.

When the volume of the music was lowered, the children were asked to pick an emotion and act it out using gestures and movement, allowing them to freeze the emotion image for a second. While they were frozen, a facilitator invited group members to begin describing the frozen image.

Following this activity, children continued to work on their image theatre skills. After the facilitator read the sentences listed below to the group of children, the children decided what emotion each sentence represented. Each child then acted out their emotional response to each sentence alone in monologues. Although the children did not explicitly label their emotions, their facial expressions and their response to the given scenarios would appear to indicate that some degree of necessary understanding was present.

The following sentences were used during the workshop:

- Going to the fun fair.
- Today is your birthday.
- While you were walking, you fell down and your friends laughed at you.
- Some friends took your toy without your permission.

SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF CREATIVE ART TECHNIQUES

During the workshops, techniques were also used to support children with emotion regulation. The creative art techniques are described below.

Spontaneous art: Children were given art materials and asked to draw or paint any emotion that they felt. Afterwards, they were asked to write sentences or speak about the meaning of their drawing.

Building a safe place: All of the children were asked to close their eyes and listen to the facilitator tell a story and asked to try to connect to their emotions. The story that was told during the workshop was based on a model story that is used in art therapy sessions. The children were told: *'imagine a safe place, it may be a place that you already know, or it may be a place that is created by the imagination. Describe that place to yourself, the images, the colours, the sounds or silences, the temperature, the entire feel of it. Once you describe it to yourself, begin to sense the feeling of that sense of safety inside your body. See if there is an image, word or phrase to describe that place'* (Rappaport, 1998, p. 2).

While children had their eyes closed, the facilitator put a piece of paper and crayons next to each participant. When all of the children opened their eyes, the facilitator asked them to draw the image of how they felt in the safe place. Afterwards, all of the drawings were shared among the

children, and if anyone wanted to speak about his/her drawing, they were encouraged to do so.

Image brainstorming: Image brainstorming is a powerful tool used to speak with children about their emotions. The children were shown pictures from magazines and asked to explain their thoughts about what emotion can be said to represent each picture. This method allows children to speak freely without judgement and criticism. This activity activates their imagination and allows them to indirectly discuss the emotions that they are experiencing.

During the sessions, the children talked about their main emotions: happiness, sadness, anger and fear. The children were asked the following probing questions: *'When do you feel happy? How do you express your happiness? What makes you angry?'* General questions regarding the most common emotions that children can define were also asked: *'What surprises you? What makes you sad?'*

Following the brainstorming session, the children were shown pictures from magazines and newspapers and were asked: *'According to you, why is the person in the picture sad/happy?'*

At the end, the children were asked to create something using recycled items, which represented 'any emotion that they wanted to express' and they were asked to write one sentence at the bottom of the picture. Generally, they drew something related to 'happiness'.

RESULTS

The aim of the workshops was to explore the power of drama and creative art techniques as tools to learn about emotion regulation with Syrian refugee children. In classroom settings, drama is a positive tool to help children recognise and understand their emotions. The workshop would appear to indicate that there was a positive impact in relation to some of the children when encouraged to use their imagination. One example is how children were able to reconsider their coping mechanisms in difficult situations. Families' coping mechanisms affect how children handle difficult situations. For this reason, what children learn from their families adds value to how they perceive situations and respond. As a result of their circumstances, anger may have been regarded as a means to resolving some problems. For example, during the understanding emotions session, different statements were given to children, and they were asked what their reaction would be or how they would try to resolve a specific situation, as highlighted below:

First statement: *'One child went to market with his mother. He asked for a piece of candy. But his mother did not buy him candy.'*

Children's responses: *'I will leave my mom and go back home.'*, *'I will not talk to her.'* and *'I will break something that she has.'*

These responses were spontaneously given by children, which show that in practice children do not automatically react calmly. However, when asked for alternative non-

violent and non-aggressive ways to respond to the situation, the children were able to identify a number of different responses. Their feedback changed after a second statement was asked for:

Second statement: *'A child comes to class and brings her toy. She plays with the toy in the classroom even though she should not, because there is a lesson taking place. The teacher takes the toy away so the girl will concentrate.'*

Children's response: *'We will say sorry to the teacher for playing in class during the lesson.'*

During the sessions, the children gave examples of how the Syria crisis affected them through image brainstorming activities. The stories and image brainstorming ideas were mainly about loss, domestic violence and child marriage. In identifying emotional responses in others, from similar socially compelling circumstances, they gave evidence regarding improvement in their ability to empathise with them and to recognise when others may be in distress or undergoing experiences familiar to them. Below are examples of how social environments affect children.

For example, during a metaphor exercise, the children formed a circle. The object in the middle of the circle was a ball, and they were asked to make up a story about this object. One 12-year-old Syrian girl used this opportunity to address child marriage:

'Once upon a time, there was a girl who loved to play and have fun. She went to the shop next to her house and found a beautiful ball. She loved it and bought it. She came back to her house. Her mother became very angry with her and criticised her, telling her she was too old to play with a ball. She told her that people had come to her to ask for her hand in marriage. But she still played with the ball. Later on, a young man came to the house to officially ask to marry her, but he found her playing. He changed his mind and no longer wanted to marry her.'

Also from the image brainstorming section was a comment about one picture: *'the woman was beaten by her husband. For this reason she could be angry'*. As mentioned above, domestic violence, the loss of loved ones and child marriage are the main topics that they encountered in their daily lives. Below are some examples of what the children said regarding other emotions during the image brainstorming session:

Sadness:

'Her mother died and her father got married to another woman. For this reason she is sad.'

'Her father is cheating on her mother. That's why she is sad.'

'She got beaten by her husband. For this reason she is crying.'

'Her father and mother were in the plane. The bomb was blasted on the plane. For this reason she is sad.'

'His wife is dead and he may commit suicide.'

Anger:

'The man is angry at his wife and he said: "I will smash you".'

'The man comeback from his job to [his] house and he saw there was no food in the house. He got angry at his wife.'

Happiness:

'A man asked her for marriage, that's why she is so happy.'
'She could be the princess from one country. For this reason she is so happy.'

'She is a well-known famous person. For this reason she is so happy.'

'Her father was living in the village and he came to the city centre. For this reason she is so happy to see her father.'

OBSERVATIONS

During the workshop there was an observable difference between the beginning of the first session and the end of the third session. In the beginning, the children were shy about engaging in activities; however, after the third session, the children felt more comfortable. They started to become more engaged and talkative. It was a positive sign that at the end of the session, during energisers, the children wanted to be in the middle of the circle as an active participant rather than just an observer. The children were highly engaged during the image brainstorming and provided valuable feedback. They expressed themselves differently: some children were talkative, but during the art sessions, they are unable to draw something, whereas some children who were quiet chose to draw more. At the beginning, it was observed that the children selected playmates of the same gender. It was understood that culture has an impact on gender segregation. For this reason, the workshop tried to take account of cultural sensitivities when possible with respect to the children. They were not forced to play with children of the opposite sex, but from time to time they were reminded that *'we are children and we can play together'*. However, at the end of the last session, some girls and boys were willing to work together during the group activity. One reason for this may be that the nature of the game was very quick. Children did not have time to think about who to partner with; rather, they were concerned with winning the game. It was observed that girls took the initiative to partner with boys rather than vice versa.

LIMITATIONS

One major limitation of the current study is generalisation. The sample was made up of 10 children who were selected to participate according to their Arabic literacy level; their background was not considered in the selection criteria for this study. No assessment was completed during the workshop relating to the children's previous psychosocial well-being. Furthermore, during the five sessions there was some degree of fluctuation in participation levels due to Ramadan and seasonal labour demands.

As the workshop was an exploratory study to address a gap that the authors perceived to exist in the literature, it will be necessary to conduct more detailed quantitative assessments and research involving larger numbers of children

with clear pre-test selection criteria and post-programme follow-up assessments in any further studies.

It should be noted that following the completion of the workshop, the parents were not questioned at a later date to see if there had been any change in their children's ability to regulate their emotions. Moreover, the authors did not self-report, and did not conduct any strict pre-selection tests and post-workshop assessments. Evaluation tools, such as including pre- and post-tests, focus group discussions with family members or follow-up activities, were not employed to measure the workshop's impact.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian crisis has had a negative impact on many children's well-being. In turn, children may have challenges expressing themselves. Post-crisis, children may face adversity, such as the loss of a caregiver, domestic violence or child neglect due to caregiver stress. If children learn strategies to support handling stressful situations, they will be able to handle the situations calmly and be mindful of their surroundings. At the end of the five-day drama workshop, children began to break down the emotional walls that had kept them from expressing themselves and they became more aware of their emotions. Moreover, children gained a better understanding of their emotions; developed communication skills, cooperation strategies and respect; and were provided with tools to activate their imagination.

Upon finishing the workshop, it was difficult to evaluate whether the children will have improved emotion regulation and be able to express their emotions better. For this reason, further long-term observation needs to be conducted. This was an introductory session, and the children need more time to practise the techniques they learned in their daily lives. Although the workshops created awareness among children, this study only covered the first stage of a larger activity. In conclusion, learning how to express emotions is key to well-being and resilience, and drama and art are powerful techniques that children can use to express themselves and activate their imaginations.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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