Listen to my picture: Art as a survival tool for immigrant and refugee students
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LISTEN TO MY PICTURE:
Art As a Survival Tool

So many children, so many colors, so many circumstances! Thirty-six children with limited English proficiency (in some cases with no knowledge of English) arrived at the elementary school, where I am the art teacher, this past fall. Joining an already diverse population of 500 students, these 36 new children from far-away countries have contributed their cultures, pictures, tears, and treasures to our school community. As an art educator in an elementary school building where students have a multitude of special needs, including the inability to speak the English language, I have discovered that a therapeutic approach to teaching art more effectively meets the unique needs of my students.

The immigrant and refugee students must contend with unfamiliar tools and routines in the classroom, not to mention long days of frustration while listening to foreign speaking strangers. Responses I have witnessed from these students who are new to America range from extreme acting-out behavior, to exhausted, puzzled stares, and silent tears. Art therapy techniques such as non-directed drawing opportunities, tolerance of shocking images, and respectful listening are especially beneficial in helping to meet the special needs of these children. The intent of this writing is to raise the awareness of art educators regarding the unique circumstances and special needs of immigrant and refugee students.

Since 1995, approximately 16 million refugees have been displaced from their homes worldwide (McCloskey & Southwick, 1996). Hundreds of thousands have arrived in America as children—children who awake in unfamiliar surroundings after long days and nights of international travel. They find themselves shuttled off to a strange school building with new people, unfamiliar customs, and a foreign language. The fighting, fear, and political strife is over for them now. But also gone are their homes, friends, and life as they once knew it. The children wonder, “Will I really be OK here in America?”

Many schools and communities across America have responded with civic duty and hospitality in reaching out to the immigrant population. There are programs designed to encourage and celebrate cultural diversity. But, what is being done to deal with the psychological scars these people live with, who have survived brutal circumstances before arriving in this country? As the interpreter for one of our students from Sudan poignantly stated, “You cannot know how we live with ourselves, with the pictures we carry in our heads of the war.”
BY LISA LEFLER BRUNICK

For Immigrant and Refugee Students

Figure 1: 1st grade student drawing. Russian immigrant, 6 months in U.S. Non-directed "free-drawing." Note details, dots, repeated patterns.
SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

More difficult to heal than the diseases, infections and malnutrition they may bring with them from impoverished homes and are the psychological and social wounds resulting from the trauma of war and displacement. Atrocities witnessed by these children and their families in war camps and on the seas before their arrival in America have caused psychological scars including regression, withdrawal, aggression, depression, anxiety, nightmares, defiance, hyperactivity, antisocial behavior, acting out, vulnerability, and paranoia (McCloskey & Southwick, 1996).

Ascher (1984) studied the specific age groups of children as they were affected by the immigration process. She learned that young people between 9 and 15 years of age will have compounded identity problems as they also deal with the normal period of adolescence. They may feel guilty about family members and friends who were left behind (Ascher, 1984). In addition, if a parent or relative is an illegal immigrant, the child may fear authority figures (e.g., teachers and counselors), hindering potentially close, helpful relationships (Harris, 1993).

Children between the ages of 3 and 10 years will arrive in America with memories of what they have survived (Ascher, 1984). They will learn English and be able to communicate their fears with words. One example of this is the following creative writing assignment by one of my fourth grade Yugoslavian refugee students (written in the learning style after a poem by Eloise Greenfield):

I Remember*
I remember small river beside
my gramma house
my little birds
my goldfishes
my funny dog
my first day in school
I remember bad war
and dead people
lots of guns
lots of sea
lots of friends
I remember a lot
but I wish I remembered what I forgot

—by Maja

Maja is surviving. She is making friends thanks to her charming personality and good looks. She is learning the English language and dealing with the American school system, thanks to her LEP (Limited English Proficiency) teacher. And yet, Maja rarely utter a sentence in English or Serbo-Croatian without a first hiccupping gulp of air, a tell-tale sign of the horror she is holding inside (according to professional consultation).

Another example of a refugee student using an art form to deal with the frightening memories of escaping war, is 10-year-old Zebiba. She has verbally shared the events of her family’s heroic efforts to flee Africa many times within our school. Recently, she was invited to offer her story at a storytelling festival on a local college campus. Each time Zebiba is allowed to share the pain of her past, her burden lessens.

Ascher (1984) goes on to describe how children, at the age of just acquiring language (12 months to 3 years old) when their lives were suddenly interrupted by war, will likely suffer lan-

*Bold type words were originally written by the poet Eloise Greenfield (Scott, Foresman & Company, 1995, pp. 118-119).

IDENTITY CRISIS

When the children and their families first arrive in America, they step immediately into new identities. Adults frequently suffer the loss of professional status, and often the recent death of a spouse may result in single parenting duties. The children seem to learn the new language fairly easily. Adults, however, are forced to rely on the children to translate anything from day to day necessities, to important family business, to personal medical needs. These parents often feel a loss of respect and authority when they must depend on their children this way, and the children may resent the situation as well.

Many family members also endure the loss of their own name, as immigration officials attempt to translate unfamiliar sounds and symbols into the English language. I was honored to assist a parent of one of my Russian students when she wanted to choose an English form of her own Russian name. As she rolled the name “Yevgeniya” over and over off her tongue, a colleague and I listened carefully and offered possible English versions. She finally settled on the name “Janie” and as I printed it on paper for the first time, she picked it up and softly said, “I am Janie.” Immigrant and refugee family members consider, “Who was I?” and “Who am I?” as they struggle with,
“Who am I to become?”

In spite of many obstacles, immigrant and refugee families continually strive to survive. Studies on refugee children have discovered that if the nuclear family managed to escape persecution and stay intact, the family was less likely to suffer later symptoms and to subsequently recover from the impact of war (McCloskey & Southwick, 1996). If however, the mother suffered from depression as a result of war-induced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the children were considered more at risk. If one or more of the parents was killed in the war, the children were discovered to be profoundly at risk (McCloskey & Southwick, 1996).

Another factor playing into the child’s well-being is how well the parent or caretaker responds to stressful or traumatic situations (el Habir & Marriage, 1994). In addition, a study by Zivic (1993) found a low correlation between the children’s self-report on the Child Depression Inventory and their parents’ and teachers’ report on the Mood Scale. Apparently the adults were not aware of the depressed state of their children.

THE SCHOOL’S ROLE

Responsible schools are designing curriculum to meet the educational needs of immigrant and refugee students. What, though, is being done to care for the students’ fragile emotional and psychological needs? Intrusive and disturbing memories of war can prohibit normal, healthy development and impede learning. In order for the children to gain control over these emotions and obtain relief, it is important for them to give expression to their traumatic memories and resulting feelings. Considering the existing lan-

Figure 2: 5th grade student drawing. Sudanese refugee, 5 months in U.S. Non-directed “free drawing.” Note: flying snake.

guage barrier and the natural utilization of their own cultural heritage, expression through art and music seems a practical intervention for immigrant and refugee children who are at risk.

The school is a natural setting for children to receive intervention, and art is an effective way for Non-English speaking children to record their experiences and grapple with their concerns. Art class can be a non-threatening environment, empowering children with media choices they are free to make and setting secure boundaries for them “within the scope of creativity” (Virshup, 1993, p. 22).

When a child presents a drawing that is laden with evidence of his or her own personal suffering, how does a teacher react? Do we trust what our eyes and instinct are telling us? How do we decipher between honest, actual experience and too much influence from television? The first response should be to ask the child, “What is your picture about?” If verbal language is a barrier, it is important to read the student’s school file, or request an interpreter. It is also beneficial to know the child’s background and to be attentive to news coverage concerning political conflict in other countries. Without knowledge of each child’s situation, it can be difficult to understand the significance of the images that they share with us.
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ARTWORK

A book by Brauner describes the work of two doctors who, over the past fifty years, have studied two areas involving art and children: the development of childhood drawing and drawing as a way to help children who are traumatized by war (Lambert, 1994). These two doctors have "adopted drawing as a crucial intervention tool" (Lambert, 1994, p. 14). They have described several commonalities in the artwork of children affected by war.

An important point to consider is that the more elaborate the drawings, the more likely there is within the child a repression of sensitivity (Lambert, 1994). Other commonalities in drawings by children affected by war include very factual recordings of war events, and not the sensationalized, fantastic version that is pictured by those who have never experienced it. The few imaginary drawings that occur are those that depict the enemy being defeated. Children of war tend to draw airplanes as symbols of power, and include burning houses, projectiles, trajectories and cadavers (Lambert, 1994).

Tanay (1994) describes the following as some of the verbal and visual symbols used by children to protect their consciousness from trauma: "worms, snakes, eyes, butterflies, spiders, ghosts, monsters, stones, hearts, fiery heads... holes and birds" (p. 238). A responsible art teacher will take note of these drawn symbols, which may offer insight about the background of the foreign student (who often arrives with little or no records of his or her past). Many of these drawings initially appear nondescript and insignificant—and so to really "hear" what a picture is saying, it is most important for the teacher to learn as much about his or her students as possible. The imagery they trust us with should not be taken lightly. Together with specific knowledge, it can provide clues and critical information about the child's well-being.

Children have much to say, and certainly children who have survived a war have a special need to find an expressive outlet for their disturbing experiences. In the book I Never Saw Another Butterfly, which documents the artwork of children held in the Terezin Concentration Camp from 1942-1944, Vaclav Havel explains, "The souls of these children used poems and drawings as a defense, sometimes by giving vent to anxiety and at other times by depicting a dream" (Volavkova, 1993, p. 104).

Psychologists, counselors, and art therapists know that it is easier to express some memories in pictures than it is in words, and how once expressed, they are still not necessarily understood. As a teacher of art, I need to be especially aware of "listening" to the stories my students' artworks are telling. My respectful listening may be their first step in the process of healing.

A former third grade refugee student used to come to the art room during my planning periods to work on his art. He had a huge chip on his shoulder, bullying other students, defying authority, and exploding into violent tantrums. But gradually he came into the art room, drew quietly and began to speak about his home in Sudan. While I sat with him one afternoon, he spoke very softly and talked on and on about watching as his father was murdered in their home and then how his many older siblings retaliated by hanging up and killing their father's attacker—kicking, biting and stoning him. As he told his story, he drew continuously—a picture of a Native American warrior in full battle costume, intricately drawn with a hundred or so tiny arrows lining the head dress. The finished drawing was cold, mechanical and shockingly detailed—parallel to the "repression of sensitivity" that Lambert wrote about regarding an elaborately drawn picture. Before he and his older sister moved away from our city to look for employment in another state, he brought in a broken old frame. I helped him to repair the frame and we carefully matted and framed his Native American drawing, to carry with him to yet another new home.

This child lived with horrors beyond my imagination and beyond his control. But he came to me, sensing help in the art room. While I was not qualified to treat his psyche, I could offer choices for him to make in the art media (some control in his life) and a quiet place for his memories to come out through the artmaking when he was ready. As I listened to his story he said, "these bad things happened to me" and I said, "yes." Being heard is the beginning of healing.

Refugee children desperately need a chance to regain their positive self-image. The trauma of both the immigration experience and fleeing war have wreaked havoc on their normal development, leaving them with damaged psyches and anxiety-ridden self-centeredness. Piaget describes "fixation trauma," whereby development is arrested due to trauma (Tanay, 1994, p. 236). This can be illustrated in drawings with detailed, repeated lines, dots or symbols. A heavy feeling of
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