



HAUNTED CHILDHOODS: EXPLORING INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF REFUGEE CHILDREN DRAWINGS

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INTRODUCTION

Social representations theory suggests that individuals use shared yet personal interpretations to navigate their physical and social environments, a concept developed by Moscovici in the 20th century. The rise of visual media through social platforms has heightened the importance of visual elements in conveying and forming social knowledge and has spurred growth in visual research methods. Though text analysis remains prevalent, visual research, particularly focusing on visual representations as a method driven by participants, is gaining traction. Drawing is considered an accessible and effective way to produce visual research materials. This study focuses on how drawing can provide insights into the experiences of refugee children, offering an inclusive medium for a group often facing societal exclusion. By examining these drawings, researchers can develop a nuanced understanding of the term 'refugee children' and their diverse experiences.

THE CHILD AND ITS RELATION WITH DRAWING

Children's drawings are fascinating and can reveal much about their inner lives, family situations, and the society they grow up in. These drawings are more than just pictures; they are a way for children to communicate with the world around them. By looking at these drawings, we can learn about the culture and contribute to a richer, more effective education.

Van Dorsten believes that cultural education, which includes the arts and understanding our heritage, helps children understand themselves and their place in the world (Van Dorsten, 2015). The drawings of children can be especially telling in education, particularly for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

For children who are refugees or immigrants, drawing is a vital way to communicate, especially when language is a barrier. It can offer insights into their thoughts and feelings. Paying attention to the context in which a child lives is crucial because it greatly influences their identity, emotional expression, and artistic creations. In a world that is constantly changing, children's drawings can be an important tool for teaching and providing psychological support.

With this understanding, we studied the drawings of refugee children in Greece to learn more about their experiences and to improve our educational methods.

DRAWINGS AND ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN

Drawing holds a special place in children's lives, serving as a key outlet for their expression, communication, and creativity. By the age of two, kids often immerse themselves in hours of painting and drawing, marking their initial exploration of art. The concept of the "child artist" was first introduced by art educator Franz Cizec in 1936, recognizing the unique nature of children's artwork.

The link between a child's drawing and their verbal storytelling was highlighted by Lev Vygotsky, who noted that children often weave narratives as they create their art. Further studies, like those by psychologist Rudolf Amhein in 1969, emphasized how children's drawings reflect their cognitive processes, with their artwork revealing their thoughts and perspectives.

Educator Eliot Eisner in 1972 and philosopher Nelson Goodman in 1976 explored the communicative and symbolic aspects of children's drawings, suggesting these creations can be a window into a child's imagination and how they symbolize the world.

Professionals in education and psychology frequently analyze children's drawings to gain insights into any potential challenges they may face, such as learning disabilities or emotional issues. Long-term studies have also shown that drawing can significantly contribute to a child's motor, emotional, and psychosocial development.

Nowadays, a variety of tests exist to better understand the drawings produced by children, typically categorized into two main groups.

TESTING SKILLS AND LEVELS:

Personality tests like the Family, Tree, and Animal Tests provide insight into a child's mental state.

Common elements in children's drawings include:

- Trees signify mental health if they have a large trunk and full branches.
- The sun represents the father's role; a smiling sun suggests an active father, while a sun without rays may indicate a distant relationship.
- Balloons, birds, and planes suggest a vivid imagination, while cars imply a desire for independence and exploration.

Colour Balance:

- Children usually prefer bright colours, and how they use colour can reflect their emotional state.
- A well-integrated colour scheme suggests good mental health, while lack of colour might point to emotional emptiness.

Additional Factors to Consider:

- Verbal explanations and voice quality can reveal a child's thoughts and emotions.
- Non-verbal cues, like body language, contradict or confirm what children say about their drawings.

- The method used to create the artwork, whether impulsive or careful, can signal different approaches to the task.
- The child's interaction with the examiner may show their level of engagement or ability to self-reflect.
- Personal information such as age, gender, intelligence, and experiences also play a role in understanding a child's artwork.

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCE:

The child's family, peers, economic status, and cultural background all contribute to the complexity of interpreting children's drawings.

Analyzing these artworks can enhance cultural education and benefit children, schools, and society.

The social and political landscape in Greece has evolved due to post-modernity and globalization, leading to an increase in immigration. Greece, often seen as a gateway to Europe, saw its immigrant population rise from 6.1% in 1990 to 11.4% in 2015. By January 2020, refugees in Greece were predominantly men (80%), with women at 60% and children at 20%, mainly from countries like Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq.

Refugees in Greece face challenges such as limited access to sanitation and a high risk of sexual and gender-based violence. The islands, in particular, lack sufficient medical and counselling staff, affecting the availability of essential services. Despite these hardships, refugee children have a right to education. However, they often encounter barriers that prevent their integration into schools, leading to social and educational exclusion.

To address this, it's important to view these children not as a problem but as individuals with unique challenges and potential. By adopting intercultural and creative approaches, such as using artifacts to express their inner conflicts and possibilities, we can better understand and integrate them into the educational system.

Refugee children often struggle with feelings of isolation, insecurity, and low self-esteem due to their experiences of war, persecution, and separation from their families. To combat their marginalization and support their psychological well-being, creative outlets like drawing can be a powerful tool. Such activities can help reveal the full spectrum of human experience and potential, leading to a more effective and empathetic approach to cultural education.

CULTURAL EDUCATION IN MODERN TIMES

In recent years, cultural education has drawn significant attention for its role in enriching education. It is particularly relevant in today's diverse classrooms, where language barriers can hinder the learning of children from different backgrounds. Cultural education encourages active participation, creation, and contemplation of culture, offering an alternative perspective that could enhance teaching methods (Van Heusden 2015).

The debate within the field is shifting towards viewing art as an active process rather than a static object. Gell (1998) suggests that art acts as an agent for personal and social transformation, not merely for expression but for personal growth and adaptation.

Childhood is often seen as a time of wonder marked by language acquisition and symbolic reasoning (Bjorklund 2007). Van Dorsten (2015) criticizes traditional education for focusing on children's limitations rather than their capabilities. Current scholarly thought recognizes children's agency and their ability to engage with and influence their environment through art (Van Dorsten, 2015).

Our understanding of childhood is shaped by social and cultural contexts and is subject to constant revision to align with societal, political, and economic needs (Waller 2005). However, the presence of refugee children in developed nations challenges Western-centric views of childhood and serves as a powerful metaphor and agent for change.

Art is not just about the physical pieces we see; it's deeply involved in social interactions, with objects in art carrying symbolic significance. Culture holds all this meaning, as noted by Van Dorsten in 2015. When looking at children's drawings, it's insightful to consider the non-verbal elements they choose to include, which add depth beyond words.

This approach is similar to the way literature is analyzed through constructivism, as suggested by Genette and Tziouvas. Imagologie, a branch of Comparative Grammatologie, delves into narratives to understand how the 'Other' and their culture are portrayed. Analyzing a story involves looking at the structure, the elements presented, and their relationships, as well as the motives behind them, as explained by Ampatzopoulou in 1980. Genette differentiates the actual sequence of events, the "story," from the "narration," which is how those events are told and arranged.

Children's drawings, or "narrations," highlight specific moments and perspectives, shaping the story they tell. Theories of representation, including Bachelar's pro-Freudian theory from 1967, investigate the psychological and ideological underpinnings of what is depicted, revealing the subjective perceptions of reality shaped by social and psychological factors.

Phenomenology, therefore, should be seen as an examination of our internal psychological responses to external reality. Bachelar, like Jung and Freud, analyzes common symbols in civilization, such as water, sky, land, and fire, to uncover cultural influences on our psyche and their various implications.

In the end, our understanding of the world is not just a reflection of what we see or experience, but is also based on these deeper cultural and psychological layers, as emphasized by Cassirer and Manheim in 1953. It's important to appreciate the richness that children's perspectives bring to our own vision.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Our research approach explores how drawing acts as a form of social expression, utilizing methods from arts-based research and participatory visual studies to analyze images from the perspective of both the artist and the observer. This approach intersects with sociology, psychology, and social psychology, particularly in refugee studies. It investigates various practices and concepts relating to drawing, such as style, realism, proportion, perspective, imagination, gesture, and the tangible and

intangible elements of artwork. We developed this approach grounded in social representations theory to better understand the experiences of refugee children through their drawings.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION THEORY

Social Representation Theory examines how societies, groups, and individuals have varying perceptions of the same concept. It incorporates concepts like Themata (core societal beliefs), objectification (making abstract ideas concrete), cognitive polyphasia (holding multiple, sometimes conflicting beliefs), and examines these ideas at individual, interactional, and societal levels. Social representations vary across society's segments due to differences in class, ethnicity, culture, and other factors. Hegemonic representations reflect the dominant ideas, values, and norms, while polemic and emancipatory representations belong to marginalized or minority groups with distinct experiences and viewpoints.

Martikainen (2020) and Hakoköngäs (2017) describe how social representations are shaped and altered through three main processes: anchoring, objectification, and naturalization. Anchoring is the process of making unfamiliar concepts familiar, which can sometimes isolate certain perspectives or groups. Objectification is when abstract social ideas are given a concrete form through symbols, like images or words, making them easier to identify and study. Naturalization happens when these ideas are so frequently shown in media and everyday life that they seem natural and unquestioned.

Researchers also look at social knowledge from three levels: ontogenesis, which is the individual use of social representations; microgenesis, the use of these ideas in social interactions; and sociogenesis, how they are shaped at a societal level, often through media and official statements. The media plays a key role in making certain ideas appear natural by repeating them often.

The study used a qualitative approach, specifically a "multiple case study" method, to understand individual attitudes and experiences. This involved collecting detailed data, including children's drawings and conversations, and analyzing them to explore how these young artists view the world, considering their varied cultural backgrounds. Due to COVID-19 protocols, many of the analyzed drawings were obtained online.

THE SAMPLE OVERVIEW

Our study analyzed 20 drawings: 19 from refugee children and one from a child of an economic migrant. Of these participants, 7 were girls and 13 were boys, all aged between 6 and 12 years old.

We categorized their drawings into themes reflecting their experiences: War, Atrocities, Family, Journey, Camp Life, Struggles to Fit In ("on the fringes of society"), and Successful Inclusion. It's important to note that while these themes are shared among the children, their unique cultural backgrounds influence the expression of their experiences, emphasizing local context over a universal one (Wierlacher, 2000).

Our careful analysis aimed to avoid the bias described by Machioldi (1998) as the "self-reflecting researcher." The results paint a picture of a challenging yet hopeful situation that has both direct and indirect impacts on the educational system and society at large.

PRESENTATION OF CASE STUDIES

THE WAR



Figure 1

The artwork depicts a family holding hands, trying to flee from danger, while others resist. A child painted in the same light green as the enemies is among them. The enemies, appearing larger and stronger, are shown surrounding a house, pointing guns at defenseless individuals either on the ground or inside the building. A river of blood is seen in the painting, but it's interrupted by the escaping family, indicating their urgent need to survive rather than confront the violence.



Figure 2



Figure 3

In the foreground, a man appears to be surrendering as a means of survival, underscoring the life-or-death situation. The background shows men surrounded by enemies and facing execution, with the recurring motif of blood in red. The drawing focuses predominantly on men, with only two women depicted on a smaller scale, reflecting the gender biases of the child's cultural environment. Notably, a 'river' divides the victims from the enemies, who seem capable of crossing it, and the enemies are drawn smaller, possibly suggesting the child's view of the victims as martyrs.



Figure 4

The central theme is a family tragedy. Despite the gruesome depiction of dismembered bodies, they are oddly colourful and sometimes even smiling. The mourner appears detached. A child imagines using his feet as a means of escape.

THE ATROCITIES



Figure 5

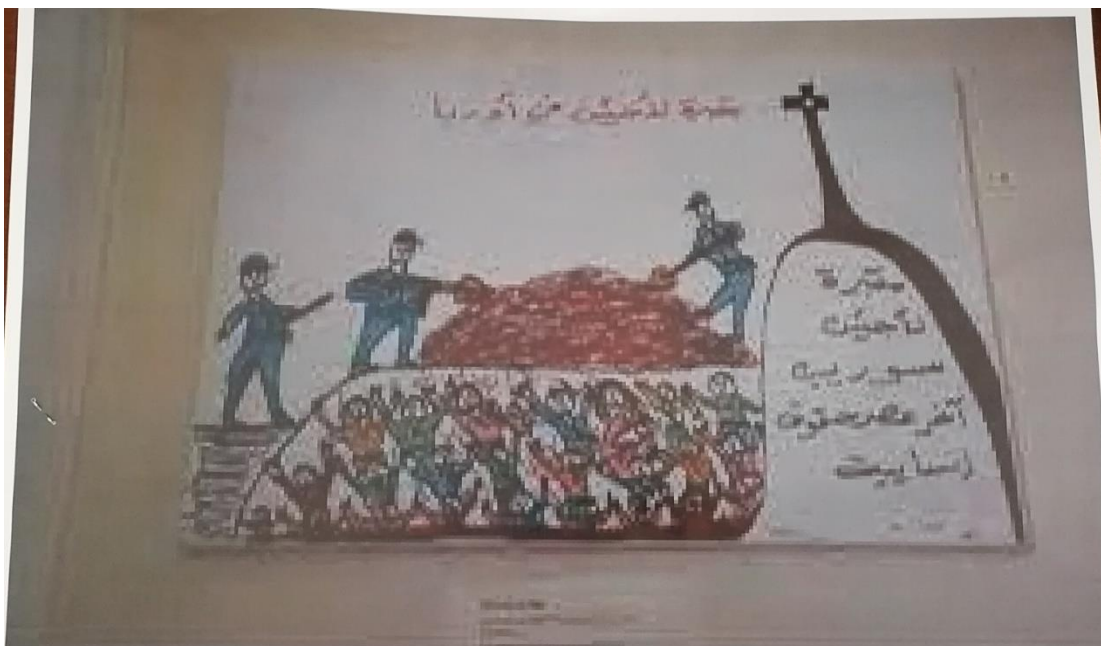


Figure 6

The portrayal of enemies is central in both scenes, with vivid colours whether light or dark. In one, a child envisions a peaceful scene above the chaos as a mental escape, while in another, outstretched hands from buried bodies symbolize a desperate cry for survival, reflecting a child's struggle to grasp death.

THE FAMILY



Figure 7

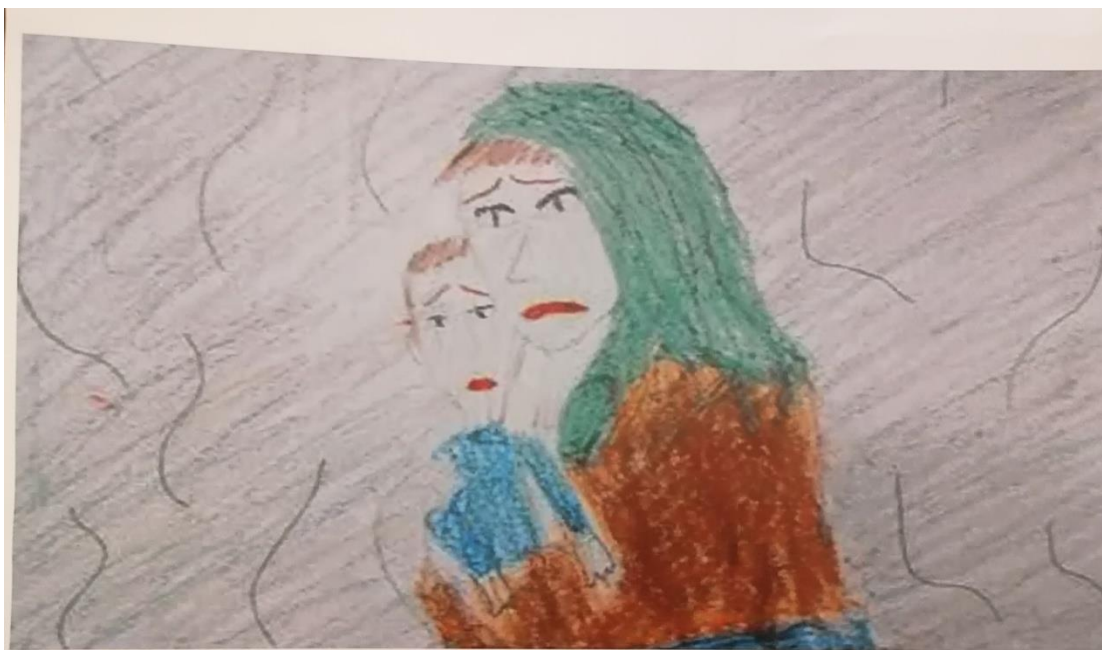


Figure 8

In both cases the concept of family, especially motherhood, is tied to grief. In one scene, a flag is less prominent than the body of a deceased relative. Emotions are intensely conveyed through stark lines and a palette of grey, red, and blue. The perspective suggests the viewer is standing before the scene in one drawing, while in another, the bond between child and mother creates a private space for them.

THE JOURNEY



Figure 9

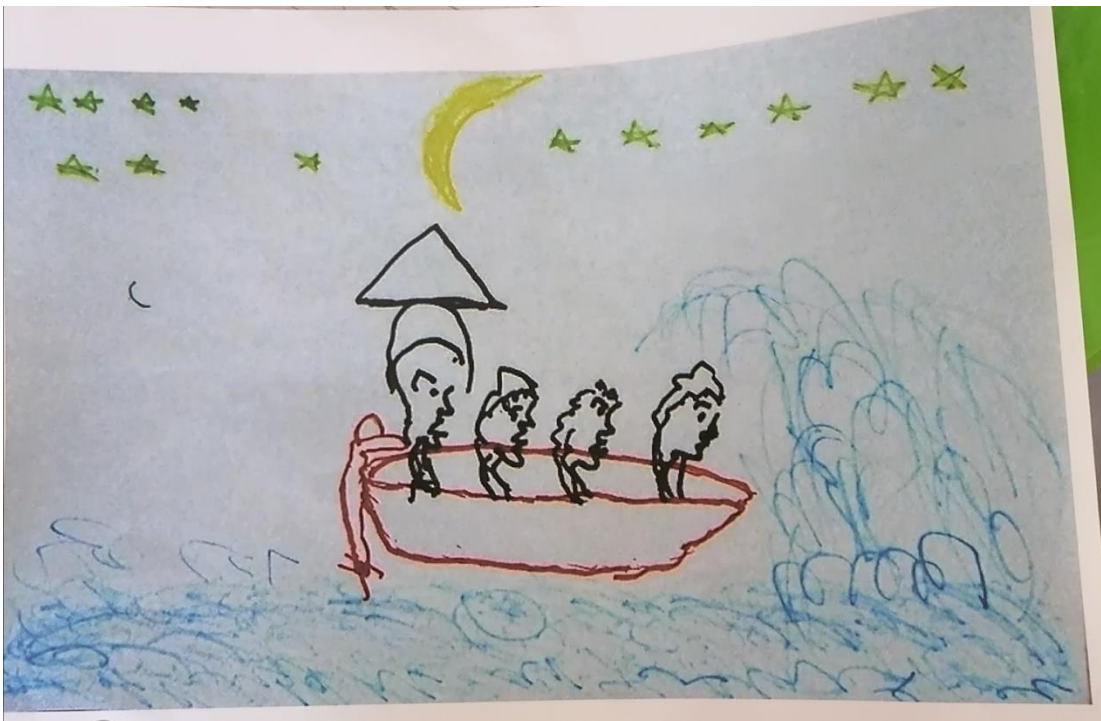


Figure 10

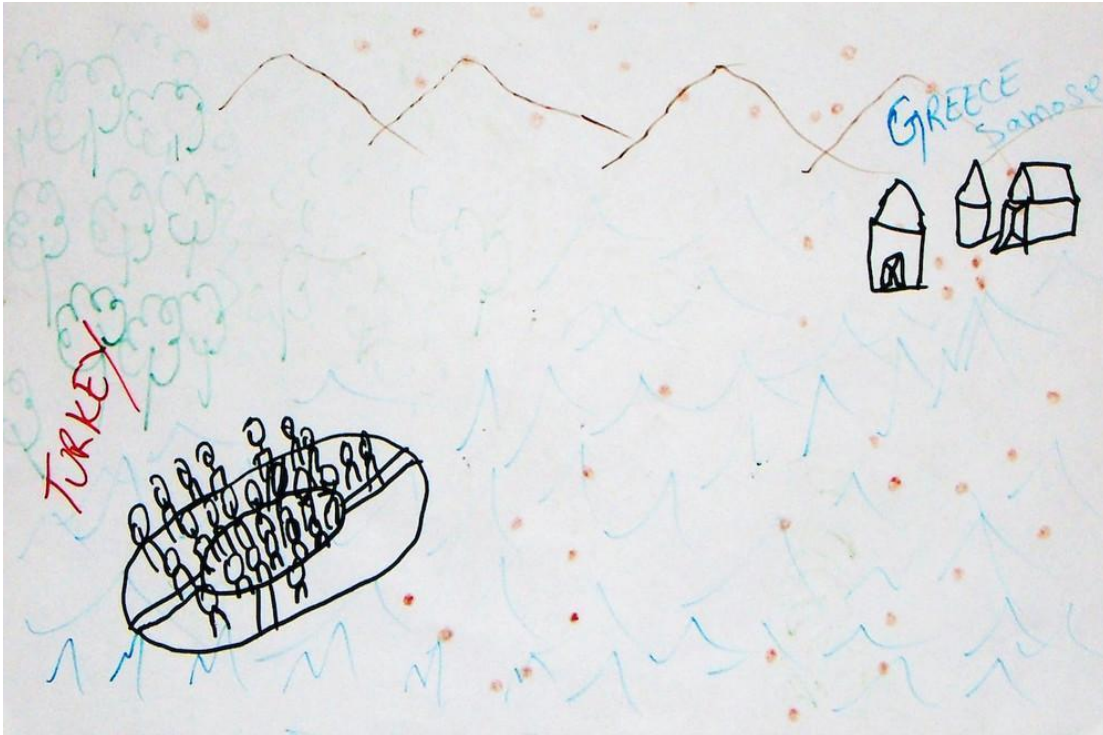


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

The hardships of a perilous journey are depicted, with more deaths and suffering. One drawing shows a family amidst fires and explosions, carrying their few belongings. The sea, a significant part of the journey, is a recurring backdrop. Dark colours portray people drowning during night voyages. Images of the dead and living packed together resemble a photo negative, showing the child's selective perception of these harrowing events, telling a story for us to hear.

THE RESCUE



Figure 14

Illustration of boats at risk of sinking, with oversized lifebuoys and human hands signifying their crucial role during a crisis. The artwork conveys a powerful mix of hope and fear through bold lines depicting a tempestuous sea and the subtle presence of a partially hidden sun.

THE CAMP



Figure 15



Figure 16

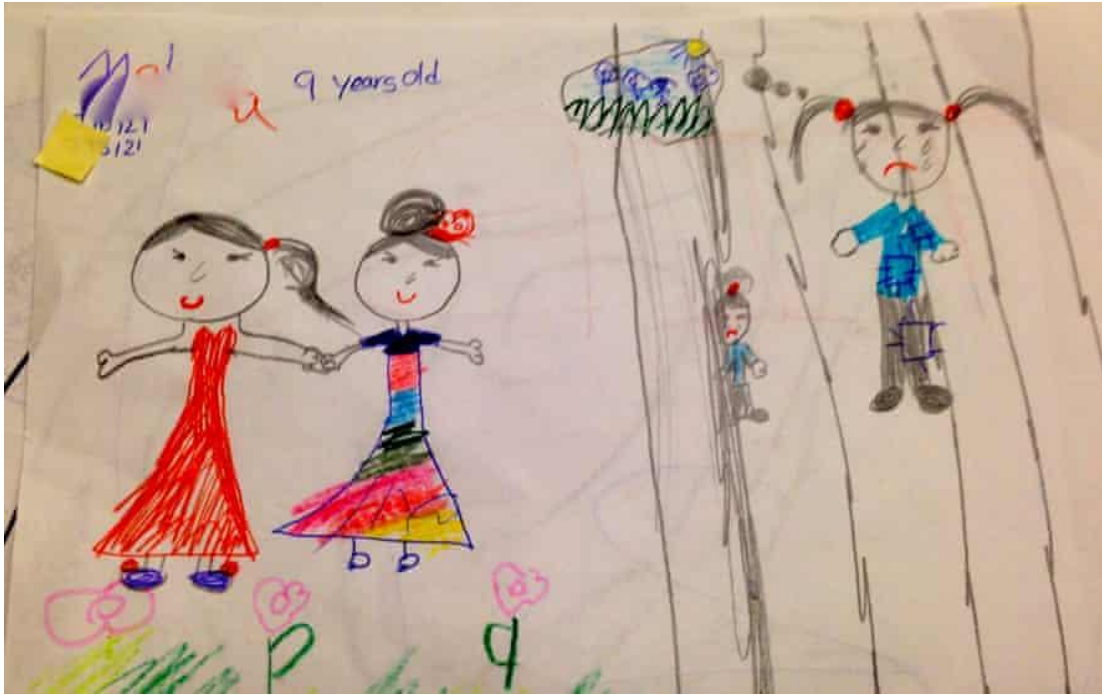


Figure 17

Artwork depicting children in a setting that reveals their mental state and gender identity through unique elements. Clothing reflects their cultural background, while barriers symbolize their feelings of being isolated and excluded from society.

IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF SOCIETY



Figure 18

An image of a home encased within a cage, symbolizing both safety and confinement. The occupants appear detached from the world, surrounded by a monochrome backdrop, with hints of colour in the flowers and a small glimpse of hopeful sunlight amidst the clouds.

THE INCLUSION



Figure 19

A drawing by a child from an immigrant family shows a divided yet beautiful scene. The father is associated with a joyous sun and distance, while the mother is closely tied to nurturing the children. The artwork is vibrant and features an animal, with a clear separation in the landscape at the father's side. Notably, there are no symbols of captivity, prompting a need for educational reflection on the subject.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Children's drawings often reveal their experiences and the world around them. For example, refugee children's art frequently depicts the harsh realities they face, such as warplanes, rather than products of their imagination. These drawings are shaped not only by their immediate circumstances but also by social and cultural influences, including ideas about gender and family. Utilizing art in classrooms can help children articulate their fears and develop their abilities. It can also encourage them to think critically about human rights and question commonly accepted beliefs about topics like war and gender roles.

The emotions of fear, anxiety, insecurity, and longing are common in these young artists' works. While some meanings in their art are clear and symbolic, others require more in-depth analysis. Creating art is a powerful way for children to express themselves, no matter their background or literacy level.

Social psychologist Serge Moscovici proposed that the variety of social perspectives motivates interaction and shapes communication. These perspectives, which can change and be negotiated, are part of the dynamic nature of social understanding. As such, children's drawings, especially those from refugees, offer valuable insights into social dynamics and challenge traditional views of childhood.

These artworks represent diverse experiences and serve as a tool to explore and understand social issues in refugee studies.

CONCLUSION

In our diverse world, it's crucial that we teach kids about different cultures in new ways. This is especially important for kids who feel left out because of language barriers. We should see kids not just as learners but also as creators, like when they make art. Their drawings help us understand their emotions and the tough situations they might face, such as feeling alone or dealing with violence. These issues can be hard to notice, but kids' art gives us clues. To really understand what their drawings mean, we need to look at all the details and what they symbolize.

Teachers and researchers need to know about cultural education because it helps us see the world differently, and this knowledge can shape how we teach kids to think critically. People who work with kids from tough backgrounds, like educators, counsellors, and social workers, should build trust with these kids. By understanding their true needs and helping them express their feelings, we can help them fit in better at school and in society. Doing this helps us build a more welcoming world for everyone.

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