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Lives Blighted by Trauma - Reflections on Working with Young Refugee Children

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

Every child has a basic fundamental right to survival, protection and education. These and many other rights are outlined in the UNCRC (1989), a legally binding international agreement. Yet the rights of children all over the world are violated on a daily basis, as they flee armed conflict and inconceivable atrocities in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea. This chapter which draws upon a reflective journal that documents my experience of working with refugee children and their families in Lesbos, Greece, illustrates the interplay between pre-migration and transmigration factors, and how they affect children and families. Set against the backdrop of the UNCRC, and the EU-Turkey deal, which has resulted in the detention of thousands of refugees, half of whom are children, in Greece, the chapter provides insight into the reality of life for children in a refugee camp. While the chapter explores the issue of trauma, it also highlights children's resilience as they establish relationships with children and adults and engage in play activities in the pre-school and daily life of the refugee camp. However, life as these children once knew it has changed utterly and forever. As families are relocated from refugee camps to European countries, I question whether early childhood educators and teachers have the capacity to meet the needs of children traumatized by war within the context of early childhood and primary school classrooms. Early childhood educators and teachers should not be left with the burden of rehabilitating these young children. Rather, political will is essential to galvanize societal support for systemic investment in national educational systems, and comprehensive supports at multiple levels, child, family, school and the wider community. The time for action is now. Children can no longer wait. This is an issue of basic human rights. The right to survival, health, well-being and education.

Keywords: children's rights, war, refugee, trauma, resilience, education

1. Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) upholds children's rights all over the world. It also draws attention to global injustices as they relate to children and childhood. While there is a universal agreement that early childhood, the period from birth to 8 years, is a significant and unique time, during which children need and have a right: to a standard of living that meets their physical and mental needs; to education; and to rest, recreation and play for example (Articles 27, 28, and 31; [1]), millions of young children are daily denied their most fundamental entitlements to survival, health and well-being. I am of course referring to the child refugees¹ of war-torn countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The children, who with their families, fled their homes because of armed conflict, unspeakable atrocities and/or human rights violations, to undertake lengthy and risky journeys in quest of asylum, legal status and a better life in Europe.

Mindful of the ethics associated with displaying photographs of dead children and families, it nonetheless took such a grotesque image to galvanize many people into action in support of refugees in 2015. Although I had read, and watched with dismay, the many reports of refugees fleeing war-torn countries, the image of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, from Kobani, in Northern Syria, will be forever etched on my mind. As I look at the photograph of him lying face down in sea water, near Bodrum, Turkey, I notice he is wearing a bright red t-shirt, dark blue shorts and matching sneakers. His arms lie lifeless by his sides, and he is dead and drowned. Reading the accounts of his death in various media reports on Thursday, September 3, 2015, I learn that his mother and his 5-year-old brother, Ghalib, also drowned, as did 12 other Syrians as they attempted to seek refuge in Greece. Aylan's father, Abdullah, paid €4000 to smugglers, for his family to get on a 5-m-long dinghy from Bodrum to Greece. When the sea became rough, the Turkish smuggler abandoned the dinghy, casting their human cargo adrift. After an hour, the dinghy capsized, but the family clung on. Mr. Kurdi tried to hold his wife and two sons with his arm, but one by one, each was washed away by the waves.

UNICEF [2] claims that no child is spared the horror of the war in Syria; violence is everywhere, ripping apart places that children thought were safe: schools, hospitals, playgrounds, public parks and children's own homes. Children, they claim, have paid the heaviest price of the 6-year war, with almost 6 million children now depending on humanitarian assistance, almost half forced to flee their homes, and some being displaced up to seven times before reaching safety. In excess of 2.3 million Syrian children are living as refugees, many having taken the "death boats" crossing the Mediterranean to Europe ([2], p. 2). Similar stories of destruction, death, displacement and loss emerge from the world's other top refugee-producing countries: Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea. Stewart [3] notes that "uncertainty, turmoil and crisis are ubiquitous in the lives of children who have come from countries of war" (p. 16).

¹Refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution. Their situation is often so perilous and intolerable that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, thus becoming internationally recognised as refugees with access to assistance from States, UNHRC, and other organizations. They are so recognised because it is too dangerous for them to return home, and they need sanctuary elsewhere <http://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html>.

According to the UN High Commission on Refugees [4], 59.5 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced, and over half of these are children under the age of 18 years. The sheer magnitude of the statistics is overwhelming and serves to depersonalize the refugees behind the numbers. Three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, his 5-year-old brother, and his mother are simply victims, but the photograph of Aylan face down, dead on the edge of the beach, is the human face of what is internationally recognized as the refugee crisis. His lifeless body, lying alone on the beach, is a stark reminder that behind every statistic is a human being, a refugee with an identity. A child with a name, a personality, a past, like Aylan, and Ghalib. Other children, such as Mahmud, Rasha, Niloofar, Emira, Sayid and Amir² whom I met while working in a pre-school setting attached to the Pikpa refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece, in December 2016 and August 2017 (5 weeks in total), look forward to getting to “Athena, Allemande and Italy”³ for a better life, sometime in the future.

Refugee experiences are diverse, and many have suffered severe personal trauma, violence and loss. This chapter which draws upon a reflective journal that documents my experience of working with refugee children and their families, in Lesbos, in 2016 and 2017, including contemporaneous notes of conversations with children and parents, and personal reflections, provides a glimpse of the refugee’s experiences of pre-migration and transmigration. MacBlain et al. [5] describe pre-migration as the time spent in the country of origin, the experiences of the families before they leave their home country, whereas transmigration is time spent fleeing away (time spent within the same continent) or time spent living in a refugee camp or time spent travelling to a new host country.

Against the backdrop of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which not only recognizes all children as rights-holders, but also that there are children around the world who need special protection because they live in extremely difficult circumstances (e.g., refugees), as well as the EU-Turkey deal, which has resulted in the detention of refugees in Greece, these entries provide insight into the reality of life for children in a refugee camp. While the chapter explores the issues of trauma, it also highlights children’s resilience in early childhood, as they establish relationships with children and adults and engage in play activities in the pre-school and daily life of the refugee camp. However, as families are relocated from refugee camps to European countries, the question as to how early childhood educators and teachers can meet the needs of children traumatized by war is a core consideration.

2. Abandoned on the Greek islands

Just before Christmas, on December 22, 2016, the military groups in the eastern part of the city of Aleppo, Syria, handed over their weapons and began to leave the city. Alsabach [6] explains how the liberation of the eastern part of Aleppo followed 6 years of war, during which hundreds of thousands of people died (more than 300,000), and more than 6 million Syrians became refugees and displaced persons, as they attempted to flee the “unstoppable

²All names used in this chapter are fictitious to maintain the anonymity of the children and families.

³These locations, Athena, Allemande and Italy were frequently mentioned by the children during my time with them.

river of blood” ([7], p. 9). Likewise, war and persecution in Afghanistan has resulted in a further 6 million refugees, making Afghans the second largest group after Syrian refugees (Duenwald and Talishli) [8], while in Iraq, a report from the UNHCR [9] notes that 3 million Iraqis have been displaced since January 2014.

Because of its location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, Greece is a major point of entry for refugees, with 1.3 million people fleeing conflict and persecution having travelled through the country in search of safety and a better life in Europe since 2015. Arrivals peaked in 2015, with 851,316 migrants and refugees entering the country [10] crossing over to the Greek Islands from Turkey [11]. Of the 1.3 million refugees passing through Greece since 2015, almost 480,000 have been children [12].

Following the unprecedented influx of refugees to Greece in 2015, European leaders signed a refugee pact with Turkey on March 18, 2016. Known as the EU-Turkey deal, the intention was to “break the business model of the smugglers and to offer migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk” [13]. In effect, it sought to reduce the flow of asylum seekers into the EU and calm the refugee crisis. Under the deal, which came into effect on March 20, 2016, Turkey will take back Syrian migrants who reach Greece illegally in return for the relocation of Syrian refugees in Europe, currently in Turkey. In return, the EU would grant visa-free travel to Turkish citizens, accelerate Turkey’s EU membership application, and increase financial aid by €3 billion to €6 billion to help Turkey manage the refugee crisis. Finally, the deal specifies that once a number of irregular crossings between Turkey and the EU “have been substantially and sustainably reduced, a voluntary humanitarian admissions scheme to transfer Syrians from Turkey to other European countries would be activated” (Ibid.).

Although the deal claims to protect all migrants in accordance with relevant international standards, and in respect of the principle of non-refoulement (i.e., not forcing refugees or asylum seekers to return to a country in which they are liable to be subjected to persecution), the return of Syrian refugees to Turkey has been heavily criticized. John Dalhuisen, Amnesty’s director for Europe and Central Asia says “*Turkey is not a safe country for refugees and migrants, and any return process predicated on its being so will be flawed, illegal and immoral...*” (in [14]).

In a scathing critique, MSF [15] highlighted what they felt were the many consequences of the deal that EU officials fail to mention or acknowledge including:

The devastating human consequences of this strategy on the lives and health of the thousands of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants trapped on the Greek islands and in the Balkans, particularly in Greece and Serbia, where they are living in limbo... whether fully implemented or not, the EU-Turkey deal follows the logic of treating people as if they were commodities, with disastrous consequences for the people affected. And ... despite evidence of the deadly consequences of their containment policy, European leaders have decided to put the survival of the EU-Turkey deal ahead of asylum seekers’ safety and protection (p. 5).

Notwithstanding Article 22 of the UNCRC, which obliges State Parties “to take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee... receives appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance,” children’s rights have been sidelined by the EU-Turkey deal. Lengthy asylum procedures and a huge backlog have

left some 62,375 refugees stranded in Greece, of whom 21,300 are children [12]. It is thought that 14,000 refugees are currently lingering on the Greek islands, “where the harrowing human cost of the deal is laid bare” [16]. In relation to children, the cost of the deal highlights an abject failure to uphold Article 27 which recognizes “the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.” In the words of Gogou [16]

Not allowed to leave, thousands of asylum-seekers live in a tortuous limbo. Women, men and children languish in inhumane conditions, sleeping in flimsy tents, braving the snow and are sometimes the victims of violent hate crimes

Based upon my direct experience of working in Lesvos, Gogou’s commentary refers in the main to the notorious Moria refugee/detention camp, described to me by a refugee in August 2017 as a “very bad place... a living hell.”

3. Pikpa: A safe haven

Lesvos is host to three refugee camps, namely Moria, Kara Tepe and the Lesvos solidarity camp, known as Pikpa. The largest of these, Moria, is a government-run camp which was established as the first “hotspot” registration and reception camp. Upon arrival in Lesvos, all refugees are sent to Moria for registration, and they are legally required to stay there for several weeks upon arrival. However, the asylum process is lengthy and may take up to a year or even longer. Accordingly, the majority of refugees are stranded in Moria in appalling conditions. While the camp was originally intended to accommodate about 1500 people, at the time of writing, 3000+ refugees are stuck in Moria camp.

Diary entries in December 2016 and August 2017 provide insight into life in Moria, as experienced by refugees, who had spent time there, before being transferred to Pikpa.

Moria is a very bad place, it’s not safe. It’s a bad place for me and my children. I am so happy to be here [in Pikpa], everybody here is very nice, they help us, give us food and medicine (Amira: Afghani mother of two children aged 7 and 8, December 12, 2016)

I spent 2½ months in Moria before coming here [Pikpa], it was terrible. I cried every day. We were not safe there, my children were not safe. Moria is not good. It was a bad place for my children, for me, and my husband, it was not good, Moria is not good (Yana: Syrian mother of three children aged 3½, 8 and 10 years, August 4, 2017).

Pikpa, near Mytilene, the capital of Lesvos, is the only volunteer-run camp on the island. This open refugee camp has been providing humanitarian support to the most vulnerable refugees, families with children, pregnant women, refugees with disabilities, those with serious medical conditions, and victims of shipwrecks who have lost loved ones at sea since 2012 (www.lesvossolidarity.org). It stands in solidarity with the refugees and people in need through shelter, protection and awareness rising on the basis of principles of solidarity, respect for human life, non-discrimination, non-violence and volunteerism (www.lesvossolidarity.org). Here, the refugees have access to medical care, education, early childhood education and care, legal assistance, food, clothes and crucially, a sense of dignity and respect. Built on a former

residential holiday campsite, Pikpa currently offers temporary shelter to approximately 106 vulnerable refugees, of whom 44 are children (Ibid.). Refugees in Pikpa live in either a wooden cabin, an isobox (i.e., a metal modular pre-fabricated container), or a large tent, that protects them from the elements and brings structure and routine to their lives.

I see women hanging out their laundry on lines between the wooden houses, sweeping the rugs from the floor of their cabin, washing pots and pans, and sometimes, sitting or standing outside, chatting to other residents or volunteers (August 7, 2017).

On my return to Pikpa in August 2017, I am concerned to find a family with whom I had worked in December 2016, still living there. The mother tells me that she has been a resident in Pikpa for 18 months. *“My concern has nothing to do with Pikpa, but with the length of time it is taking to process their application for asylum”* (August 1, 2017). However, I notice that the youngest child in the family, 6-year-old Amir, who in December *“was fretful and fearful is now a smiling happy little boy, who seems completely at ease in the camp.”*

This evening, as I was chatting to a core staff member, Kostas, Amir passed by. Kostas swooped him up into his arms and hugged him tightly, proclaiming “I love this little boy, I love him so much.” This is how it should be for children, they should feel loved (August 2, 2017)

Kostas is not the only person to express his love for the children. The manner in which the camp is maintained, the interactions with children, the attention to detail in the pre-school setting, and the outdoor play area, is testimony to Pikpa’s desire to make life better for the children living there

There is evidence of love all around Pikpa, in the beautifully painted walls which make the surroundings inviting and cheerful for children, in the amazing natural outdoor play area that was constructed during 2017 by a team of Norwegian volunteers, in the exchanges between volunteers, staff and children, a hand on a shoulder, a smile, a high five as a child passes by. The adults delight in the children

Children come running to meet volunteers in the morning, and women and men wave and smile from the door of their home, or as they wander about the central outdoor multi-purpose area as we arrive to camp (August 8, 2017).

The mutual respect between the refugees, the core staff team and the volunteers is clear. Pikpa provides a safe, secure haven for the most vulnerable refugees as they await asylum.

4. Pre-migration. Children’s experiences in their home country

Upon my return from Pikpa in December 2016, I wrote: *“the children have seen more in their short lives, than I will ever see in my life-time”* (December 21, 2016). There is no doubt that many of the children have seen things they should never have seen, and have been privy to conversations and experiences that no young child should be exposed to. There is no doubt either that these experiences have a profound impact upon children’s psychological well-being, leading to unpredictable and challenging behaviors.

Take the case of Mahmud, an 8-year-old boy living in Pikpa with his mother and two siblings in December 2016. Mahmud’s behavior was generally unpredictable and disruptive. He

found it difficult to apply himself to activities and was unable to sit still for any period of time, preferring instead, to wander aimlessly about the camp. It was *“difficult to know where to begin, how to work with him to support him”* (December 4, 2016). A chance encounter with Mahmud’s mother on December 17, 2016, provides the context for his behavior. As Melika speaks Farsi, and has just a smattering of broken English, she gestures for me to come into her home,⁴ *“welcome.”* The following account, relayed by Malika through broken English, gestures and tears, details the pre-migration factors that forced her to flee her country with her three children.⁵

Three years ago, the military came to their house, they cut babo’s⁶ throat. Mahmud who was five years old, was in bed asleep. His brothers (then 12 and 9 years old) were distraught at seeing what happened to babo, and they cried out. The military smashed one boy’s hips by kicking him, and the other’s thigh bones before throwing both boys on top of their dead father.

She shows me a photograph of her family, taken prior to the atrocity. In it, she stands smiling beside “Babo” surrounded by their three sons. I notice a swimming tube hanging from the ceiling of the wooden hut, attached to which, is a photograph of a smiling Mahmud. When I point to it, Melika laughs amid her tears and points to Mahmud in the photograph; he uses the tube as a swing. *“A young boy engaging in playful behaviour in the safety of his home, his sanctuary with his mother and brothers. Somehow, I am gladdened by this image, and can imagine the joy he brings to their lives”* (December 17).

Also in December, a 15-year-old girl, Rasha, tells me the circumstances surrounding her arrival in Pikpa. It is Thursday, December 8, we are sitting on a bench, enjoying the winter sunshine. Somewhere in the camp, music is playing, and it carries on the still December air. A simple question, *“do you like music Rasha”* provokes the conversation described here. Rasha *“loves music”*; her mother was a music teacher; she taught *“piano and violin.”* Then, four words *“I miss my mother,”*

Upon returning from school one afternoon, three years ago, when Rasha was twelve, she found her mother’s lifeless body in the rubble of their bombed-out home. The bomb was dropped while she was in school. Her dead, ten year old sister lay further inside the house. Her mother had a large wound to the back of her head. Rasha sat in the hospital with her mother for 3 months, “then she was gone” [dead].

Rasha and her brother who was two at the time of the bombing fled with their father, finally arriving in Lesvos. Rasha takes antidepressants. She is *“afraid to close my eyes, I see mother in my head.”*

In August 2017, it is two young sisters: Niloofar and Emira who provide insight into the pre-migration factors that impelled their family’s journey to Greece. They describe how

Five members of father’s family were killed, including grandfather. They girls are very sad. They miss their country. It is very beautiful. They are sad because they cannot go with water and flowers, for their grandfather, they cannot give him water and flowers

⁴Melika lives in a wooden house—an open internal space that serves as living room, and sleeping accommodation with her three sons, two of whom are disabled.

⁵The account provided here has been confirmed by the camp coordinator at Pikpa who was aware of the families circumstances at registration in the camp.

⁶Fathers are called babo.

There are glimpses here of multiple losses: the loss of five family members, the loss of their beautiful country, and the loss of being unable to engage in the simple act of visiting and placing flowers on a grave.

Later that day,

I heard a story about how the girls' uncle was dismembered by Isil, and I am chilled to the bone. What have these children been through in their short lives? How can they face each day with a smile, full of seemingly happy incessant chattering, playing with their dolls (August 3, 2017)

The incongruity of the children's pre-migration experiences and my observations of them playing with dolls, caring for their "babies," laughing and chatting with friends is reflected in a journal entry that night: "There is something so unsettling about watching children playing with dolls, laughing, chatting, going about daily living, knowing the trauma they've been through."

I wonder how the children are so resilient, or whether they are suppressing their feelings.

5. Transmigration: Fleeing and living in a refugee camp

As mentioned earlier, transmigration is time spent fleeing away, or time spent living in a refugee camp, or time spent travelling to a new host country [5]. Discussions with children and their parents reveal aspects of their perilous journey to Greece, as well as the post-traumatic stress experienced by them following their arrival in Lesbos.

On December 3, 2016, I accompany Lely (aged 8) and her 6-year-old brother Sayid, to the Mosaik Support Centre⁷ in Mytilene, for choir practice. We make the journey from Pikpa to Mytilene by taxi, travelling along the picturesque Aegean coastline. Shortly into the 5-km journey, Sayid becomes increasingly agitated and begins to call out "sea no good, boat no good, sea no good, boat no good" as he flaps his hands wildly. I am relieved when the taxi drops us at Mosaik, and walk upstairs with both children.

At the top of the stairs, Sayid collapses onto the wooden floor of the ante-room where children wait before being called into the practice room. He curls into the foetal position, and wails. Not knowing what to do, I sit alongside him, place my arms around him, repeatedly saying "its ok, it's ok." I am worried that I am doing more harm than good. At one point, I look up to see his sister standing in the opposite corner, silent tears running down her face He wails for 30 minutes, gets up and walks quietly into the other room where he joins the children for the last 20 minutes of choir practice (December 3, 2016).

Following choir practice, as we walk along the street from Mosaik toward Mytilene town center, "a small hand finds its way into mine, Sayid. He smiles broadly as he places half a mandarin orange into my hand. Friendship, trust, safety?" (December 3, 2016).

⁷The Mosaik Support Centre is a collaborative project run by Lesbos Solidarity and borderline-Europe. Mosaik aims to move beyond immediate crisis response and to offer sustainable structures to support refugees in their resolve to live with dignity. Bringing together over 630 students aged 4 to 89, from 20 countries, Mosaik offers language courses in English, Greek, Arabic and Farsi, legal support for asylum applicants, vocational training in arts and crafts, upcycling workshops, music and dance classes, daycare for young children, and cultural events supported by artists, activists and organisations from across the world.

Media reports frequently relay accounts of dangerous boat journeys as refugees attempt to find a safe place to live or reunite with family members scattered by war. But what is it like to be a child on that journey? Niloofar (10 years old) tells me she came to Greece with her family in a “rubber boat.”

It was night time, dark and very scary. The children were told to be quiet. If you fall, nobody would know, nobody would see you, there were so many people, nobody would see you, you would go down, down, down (August 3, 2017).

Having survived such a traumatic sea crossing, children must then adjust to life in a refugee camp. Yana, the Syrian mother mentioned earlier, shares a brief insight into her life living with her family in Pikpa. As discussed, prior to arriving in Pikpa, the family had lived in Moria for 2½ months. Yana describes Pikpa as “good, very good.” Notwithstanding her praise for Pikpa, she indicates her wish to leave as soon as possible. Why? “I want a house for me, my husband and my children. Just us, nobody else.” These families have lost so much. While they have fled war and strife, the sacrifices have been enormous. Not only have they lost family members, their homes and their jobs, they have lost their identity and their autonomy. They are refugees. They have had to adjust to communal living, where everything they do happens in the public eye.

Another mother talks about the monotony of every day:

You get up. Some days, I don't want to, but I must. I must get up for the children. I wash, they wash, prepare the breakfast, eat the breakfast, tidy up. Wash the plates. Every day over and back, over and back to wash plates. Clean the house. Cook dinner, wash the plates. Walk around, talk to people. Go to bed. Every day it is the same

This account also gives an indication of this mother's mental well-being, an issue that is echoed in the following conversation with Yana, who describes how the heat and the noise create difficulties for her and her children

It is so hot in the house at night⁸ we cannot sleep. There is no air. Why are there so many planes at night? All night long, we hear the planes from the airport.⁹ It is too much- the heat and the noise. I am so tired, always so tired. I cannot sleep, and my children cannot sleep.

Transmigration phases vary in length, leaving the refugees in limbo. Although Pikpa provides a safe haven for refugees and provides for their basic needs, the longer refugees are forced to wait for a decision on their asylum application, the more uncertain, disappointed, frustrated and anxious they become.

6. Children's learning and development

The pre-school setting at Pikpa provides a safe space both indoors and outdoors for children to play, socialize and relax. It is open Monday to Friday from 10.00 am to 1.00 pm. Premised

⁸Yana lives with her husband and three children in a wooden house which is an open space not divided into individual rooms, and so it simultaneously serves as living and sleeping space.

⁹Lesvos airport is located 3 km approx. From Pikpa.

upon the Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: *Aistear* [17], activities focus upon well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, exploring and thinking. The pre-school provides structure and routine for children.

Children's attendance tends to be erratic. They may attend for 20 min, play with playdough, work in the home corner, make a puzzle, or paint a picture, and then they disappear. Some children will stay longer, while others will come, just for the daily snack. A diary entry on December 8, 2016, documents my frustration with this approach to attendance; *"I am finding it really hard to adjust to children coming and going all morning. One minute you're working with them, next minute they're gone. This is impossible."*

The fact is that many children have difficulty concentrating, are irritable, and have outbursts of rage, which make it difficult for them to commit to the setting. Overtime, and as my understanding of their circumstances grows, the flexible approach to attendance makes sense.

Regardless of what time they arrive, or how long they remain, whether for 15 minutes or an hour, each child has the freedom and opportunity to play, to relax, to just be 'a child' during that time

Two brothers (aged 7 and 8) arrive daily around 10.30 am. They do not interact with any of the other children. Their sole activity is painting. Each stands side by side at a makeshift easel, and paint a picture of a boat on water, against the backdrop of a blue sky. When finished, they stand back, look at their pictures and leave. Occasionally, they remain for snack. This ritual continues from December 3 to 13, when instead of going to the painting area as normal, one boy *"went to a table set up with markers, colouring pencils, A4 sheets, glue, and glitter."*

He drew a bowl of fresh fruit (bananas, grapes, oranges and strawberries). His recall and attention to detail is amazing. His mother came with some food for the boys (cooked beetroot). As she admired his drawing, she revealed that she is an artist, and she wishes for the boys to be creative. She also says that her son has drawn a vase of flowers from their home

As recorded in my reflective journal, *"I wonder what it was that prompted him to draw a picture from his home, rather than paint the usual picture of a boat today."*

Much of the learning results from impromptu opportunities, made possible through a well-prepared learning environment. For example, a bath of dry sand strategically placed outside the isobox, which houses the pre-school, provides the perfect opportunity for 2½ -year-old Mariam, and two friends to spend an hour walking over and back to the water taps located in the center of the camp, filling beach buckets, pouring the water into the bath of sand, as they wonder *"why is it [the sand] messy now."*

There was so much learning going on. Cooperation, teamwork, conversation, discussion, negotiation, bending, lifting, pouring, hand-eye coordination, sensory development. The list is endless. And the children were having so much fun, all self-directed (December, 13th)

Learning opportunities are not always joyous occasions. Indeed, the following day, December 14, 5-year-old Amir vents his frustration as Mariam plays with a toy he wants. Refusing to wait his turn *"he placed both hands around Mariam's neck and squeezed with all his strength. It was almost impossible to get him to release, his rage was out of control."* There are numerous similar

episodes involving other children who frequently lash out, gritting their teeth, balling their hands into fists, biting, kicking and screaming.

Many innovative approaches are utilized by volunteers to help children deal with their emotions. Two such approaches involve creative art therapy and dance/movement therapies to promote emotional stability, self-regulation and to build relationships. Through these approaches, children are helped to develop their sense of self, and others, impulse control, interpersonal boundaries, social skills, coping skills and trust.

In the lead up to Christmas, 2016, children in Pikpa, like children all over the world, are busy preparing: baking, making decorations, crafts, painting and so on. Parents are invited to join the children for a craft workshop on December 7 at 3.00 pm for 1 h.

The tent was alive with the sound of chatter. Mother and children worked together in groups. One man came, and some women who did not have children, and worked together, laughing, chatting and interacting with the children. What an amazing experience? So many parents and children working together, sharing ideas, materials, and learning from each other. Parents and children were still working happily together at 6.00 pm with no sign of finishing

Likewise in August, a baking activity results in a shared learning experience involving Yana, her two daughters (aged 8 and 10) and their two 10-year-old friends. The girls had accompanied me and another volunteer to Mytilene, the previous Friday (August 4) to purchase ingredients for a cake they wished to make as part of the pre-school program.¹⁰ We have use of the communal kitchen on Monday, August 7, from 10.00 am to 11.30 am. "The excitement was palpable as they set about organising the ingredients, and cooking utensils required for the cake."

Their knowledge of baking was impressive, as they beat eggs and sugar, threw in the requisite amount of flour, baking powder (no weighing required), and turned on the oven. As the activity progressed however, they became increasingly agitated, arguing among themselves in their own language, storming about, and shouting. A heated argument about the amount of chocolate to use resulted in one of the girls heaping a large amount of chocolate like substance into the mixture. The resultant mixture was lumpy.

Two girls storm from the kitchen. Yana returns with the girls, and following a brief discussion, she set about beating the mixture with a spoon until it was creamy and free of lumps. Her 8 year old daughter claps her hands, 'I knew my mother would know what to do.' While the cake is baking, Yana tells me that she and her husband were professional bakers in Syria and had run their own business. More loss.

7. Access to education

Article 28 of the UNCRC recognizes the right of the child to education. With a view to achieving this right progressively, and on the basis of equal opportunity, States shall, among other things, "make primary education compulsory and available free to all." While Bačáková [18] argues that school and the school environment are critical to facilitating the successful integration of refugee children and adults in a new society, Stewart [3] suggests that education is

¹⁰Older children attend the pre-school during the summer.

a catalyst for change and that schools are where most children want to be (p. 9). On August 31, 2016, the Greek Parliament adopted a Law (Law 4415/2016) which allows for refugee children aged between 6 and 15 years to attend school in Greece [19]. Accordingly, all refugee children have the right to access school, provided that they are vaccinated.

Within 2 days of arriving in Lesvos in August 2017, children show me their arms, indicating they just been vaccinated, so they can start school in September. They are proud of their bravery, *“it hurt, but only a little bit. I did not cry.”* They have been well prepared for the after-effects of vaccination and know they *“might have a fever, maybe not in the day, but in the night.”*

Amir’s mother chats about the importance of education for her son... *“education is everything.”*

When her first son was born, she taught him his ABCs, and 123s. There were always books, and he went to school, until he came to Greece at the age of 13 years. She hasn’t done any work with Amir. He had the pre-school in Pikpa, and besides, she is very busy with her third child who has Special Educational Needs. School will be very good for Amir, he will have a future with education.

She regrets that her oldest son *“has not opened a book”* since arriving in Greece. She does not want this for Amir and is *“so happy he has the opportunity to go to school.”*

Children are excited, and looking forward to going to school. On August 7, three girls greet us as we arrive to camp. They chant *“thirty more days to school, thirty more days to school.”* When asked what they are looking forward to, they indicate *“making new friends,” “learning new things”* and *“going to school on the bus.”* Yana joins in their excitement, laughing and repeating *“thirty more days to school.”* She too is *“happy for them. It is good they go to school.”*

As the discussion continues, the girls tell me what they would like to do when they leave school. All three want to go to university, *“maybe in Allemande”* one tells me. University is necessary to enable them to become *“a doctor. I want to save people who are sick,”* or *“a police man. I will protect you,”* or *“a baker, I love making cakes like my mother.”* Laughing, they are adamant that they will not *“get married until we are 27”* why? They want *“freedom. I do not want my husband telling me what to do, wash the cups, get the dinner, wear this, wear that.”* Again, Yana laughs, *“they want freedom.”* Reflecting upon the girls’ discussion, I write: *why am I not surprised that these girls want to help other people? Have they been influenced by their experiences? And what about, their views on marriage, so insightful. Change is on the way, next generation.*

8. Discussion and conclusion

As discussed throughout this chapter, the rights of refugee children are been completely violated by armed conflict and unspeakable atrocities. These children experience change in almost every aspect of their lives: family structure, schooling, community, friends, culture and the overarching society in which they live ([3], p. 21), and life as they once knew it has changed utterly and forever. The reflections in this chapter illustrate the interplay between pre-migration and transmigration factors, and how they affect children and families. Children’s psychological well-being is severely compromised by their experiences. Mahmud who was 5 years old, at the time of his father’s brutal murder, and vicious maiming of his brothers, is

aggressive and disruptive. Fifteen-year-old Rasha who returned from school, aged 12, to find the bodies of her mother and 10 year old sister in their bombed out home, is afraid to close her eyes because she sees her mother in her head. Ten-year-old Niloofar instantly recalls her fear of falling from the rubber boat during the perilous journey to Lesbos. She and her sister Emira lost five members of their family and mourn the loss of their country, their dead family members, and miss being able to place flowers on their grandad's grave. Six-year-old Sayid breaks down following a taxi journey along the Aegean coastline, but gathers himself together and continues with choir practice in Mosaik. These children's lives are blighted by trauma.

One year on from the EU-Turkey deal, Medecins Sans Frontiers [15] reports that anxiety, depression and aggression are on the rise, with children as young as nine, cutting themselves, attempting suicide and using drugs to cope. Worryingly, two children (aged 10 and 15) whom I met during my time in PIKPA have attempted suicide. McMullen et al. [20] suggest that while post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the most researched mental health difficulty in war-affected children, other consequences can include depression, aggressive behavior and social difficulties. These issues which are pervasive within the refugee population represent an outrageous abuse of children's human rights, including the right to an identity; to special protection; to an appropriate standard of living; to education; and to play and recreation [1].

The situation for child refugees is indefensible and unacceptable. It screams injustice and undermines the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. On a daily basis, children are denied their most fundamental entitlements to survival, health and well-being. Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Special Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe, urges us never to forget that "children on the move are first and foremost children, who bear no responsibility for their plight, and have every right to a better life" (in UNICEF) [2].

This poses a challenge for the education system, as refugees are granted asylum, or relocated through the EU relocation and resettlement program to countries such as Germany, Finland, Ireland and Sweden. According to the UNHCR [21] "access to education is a fundamental human right, and States have an undisputed obligation to provide access to education for all children" (p. 5). States should do everything possible to ensure that education is of the highest quality and meets the needs of all learners (ibid.).

Just because children are relocated does not mean that the trauma disappears. For many children, traumatic experiences can lead to problems with academic performance, inappropriate behavior in the classroom, and difficulty forming relationships [22]. In considering the challenges that lie ahead for refugee children during post-migration (life following asylum, or relocation), the capacity of the education system to address their complex needs warrants attention. Stewart [3] summarizes the difficulty: "*A refugee child may come into the classroom after witnessing the most inhumane acts of violence, and be expected to follow along with the lessons-to do as the others do. But this is unrealistic*" (p. xviii). School may well provide consistency and routine for children displaced by war and persecution, but can traumatized children learn if their psychological well-being is not addressed? Are early childhood educators and primary school teachers equipped with the knowledge and skill required to work with these troubled children? Are they prepared to use flexible and innovative approaches with children who only have the capacity to remain in classroom for 30 min or half an hour?

According to Digidiki and Bhabha [5] the refugee crisis has created a need for specially trained practitioners. UNESCO [23], for example, indicates that one of the barriers to inclusion in national education services can be the language of instruction, where the language in the host country differs from that spoken by refugees. Consequently, programs that use rigorous second-language teaching methods are essential (Ibid.). Citing a psychologist working with children in Greek refugee camps, UNESCO claims that many of the people hired to work with the children do not have appropriate training and knowledge, and caution that:

A certificate or attendance at a seminar does not qualify someone to work with children suffering from trauma. Even trained practitioners, dealing with the complex trauma and risks that children face on a daily basis can find the circumstances overwhelming and challenging. [...] Supporting children's resilience requires time, patience, and a protective environment (UNESCO, p. 32).

Time, patience, and a safe environment. Such a simple ask. Yet it underscores the complexity of the task ahead for early childhood educators and teachers with regard to creating a safe and secure learning environments where traumatized children can make friends and establish positive relationships with educators, teachers and other adults within the setting/school. While emotionally safe environments are critical to inclusive practices (Moloney and McCarthy forthcoming), in the context of children traumatized by war, multilevel interventions are essential, for example, at the level of child, family, school, and the wider community.

Early childhood educators and teachers should not be left with the burden of rehabilitating these young children. They should not be expected to work in isolation. It is imperative that educators, teachers and highly trained professionals work collaboratively to provide a continuum of care, education and ongoing support for children and families.

Alongside this, educators and teachers must engage in intensive continual professional development opportunities so that they understand how traumatic experiences impact children's capacity to learn, establish relationships and trust. Training must also focus upon understanding culturally diverse practices. Moreover, as part of a long-term strategy, political will is essential to galvanize societal support for systemic investment in national educational systems and to ensure adequate staffing (including second-language teachers and translators), resources, and additional supports as necessary are available to adequately include children within the educational system and build knowledge and skills for self-reliance and resilience. The time for action is now. Children can no longer wait. This is an issue of basic human rights. The right to survival, health, well-being and education.

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