From helplessness to a renewed sense of agency: The integration of puppets in the Art & Storytelling school-based creative expression program with immigrant and refugee children

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A B S T R A C T

The distress experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic can add to the already stressful experience of migration for children and their family, having serious short-term and long-term impact on their mental health and meaning-making processes. Since creativity acts as a protective buffer for children and support their adjustment, the implementation of school arts-based interventions can help support the recovery of children and promote their coping and adaptive strategies. Through the case study of a 7-year-old Syrian refugee, this article presents how a young girl invested the Art & Storytelling school-based creative expression program to regain a sense of agency and control in a (post-)crisis context. Based on the images she created during the workshops as well as on the individual and group observational field notes recorded by workshop facilitators, the case study highlights the child’s creative process and its relationship to the creation of meaning and her developing sense of agency. It focuses especially on how the girl integrated puppets into her own creative process to regain a sense of agency and control over her life.

Introduction

According to the most recent population survey, 23% of Canada’s total population was immigrant, which represented 8361,505 of people who were foreign-born in 2021. Of this number, 2186,705 people were under the age of 15, 1328,240 had arrived as immigrants and 218,430 who were foreign-born in 2021. Of this number, 2186,705 people were total population was immigrant, which represented 8361,505 people (Government of Canada, 2022). For all these children and their family, immigrating to a new country can bring its share of stresses and difficulties in children and as a way to support their coping skills, agency and sense of control over their life, experts have called for immediate intervention, especially for children coming from vulnerable communities (Beghetto, 2021; Gassman-Pines et al., 2020). In this regard, schools are well positioned to bring such post-crisis support by providing psychological first aid. Indeed, psychological first aid consists in a “humane, supportive response to a fellow human being who is suffering and who may need support” (World Health Organization, 2011, p. 3). Based on listening and comforting skills, it is a support that can easily be provided in schools by its staff and not only by mental health professionals according to WHO. To this end, schools can adapt to integrate spaces to hear children’s voice and experience, in a structuring environment (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021; Papazian-Zohrabian & Mamprin,
The opening of play and creative spaces within schools would be particularly appropriate for this purpose.

Interventions based on creativity and the arts are known to foster adaptation and resilience, especially in times of crisis (Chatterjee, 2018; Forggense, 2013; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). However, much research remains to be undertaken to document whether arts-based intervention programs constitute psychological first aid intervention in a post-crisis context and how they could help children regain a sense of agency and control on their life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of initiatives were developed to protect children wellbeing, often without time nor resources to document their impact. In order to preserve the lessons learned and capture the complexity of these intervention qualitative studies are needed.

Accordingly, this article presents how Mounia, a 7-year-old refugee girl from Syria, invested school-based creative expression workshops to regain a sense of agency and control in a (post-)crisis context. The case study is taken from a larger study that took place in reception classes in Canada and that aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Art & Storytelling program (Sherpa University Institute & TRIT, 2016) to improve the emotional well-being and school readiness of primary school-aged refugee children. While the planned fieldwork was disrupted, it was decided to adapt the research and intervention to the pandemic context. The case study is based on the images created by children during the workshops as well as on the individual and group observational field notes recorded by workshop facilitators. It explores the creative process of Mounia and its relationship to the creation of meaning and her developing sense of agency. It focuses especially on how the girl integrated puppets into her own creative process to regain a sense of agency and control over her life in a context in which migratory adversity and the pandemic coincided.

Immigration, adversity, and the pandemic

Immigration is a stressful process that can be a source of adversity for refugee children, who often experience pre- and post-migratory hardships and may be exposed to traumatic events before their departure and during the trip to the country of asylum (Bennoua et al., 2020; Fazel & Betancourt, 2017). During their resettlement, refugees and especially asylum seekers can experience insecurity due to their uncertain migratory status (Fazel et al., 2012). Moreover, a majority of refugee families live in a precarious economic situation, which can result in food insecurity, inadequate housing and complicated access to educative and health services (Morantz, Rousseau, Banerji, Martin, & Heymann, 2013; Rousseau et al., 2013). Experiences of family separations, social isolation, exclusion or discrimination can also be added to these difficulties (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Pacione et al., 2012). The psychological distress resulting from these experiences of adversity could disrupt their sense of control and agency, which would normally have a protective and adaptive role in times of crises (Beghetto, 2021; Rousseau & Miconi, 2020).

From 2020 to 2022, the pandemic of COVID-19 aggravated the hardships experienced by immigrant and refugee families. Increased social isolation combined with job losses as well as work and school closures put undue stress on families (Coller & Webber, 2020; Gassman-Pines et al., 2020). As a result, levels of anxiety, depression or feelings of helplessness increased in many homes, disrupting family dynamics and the meaning-making processes necessary for recovery and to regain a sense of agency (Brooks et al., 2020; Rousseau & Miconi, 2020). If the pandemic had an impact on most children’s social and emotional development, this effect was overall greater for refugee children than for children who were native-born because of the exacerbation of pre-existing health and social inequalities (Cleveland et al., 2020; Coller & Webber, 2020; Gadermann et al., 2021; Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Morrow & Weisser, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2020).

All these forms of combined adversities exacerbated the risk of refugee children developing difficulties in school. Literature has shown that school success is associated to the emotional well-being of children (Kaplan et al., 2016). On the contrary, anxious children may have difficulty processing information and persevering when faced with difficulties, which can lead to low school performance and have a negative effect on children’s academic well-being (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Korhonen et al., 2014). When children perceive themselves as being able to achieve a task and succeed in spite of difficulties (self-efficacy), they are usually better equipped to cope with everyday challenges and adversity (Cattelino et al., 2019). Feelings of helplessness were often at the forefront during the pandemic, in particular for families confronting adversity (Cattelino et al., 2021; Coller & Webber, 2020). The situation could have had a negative impact on children’s sense of agency and on their perception of having some control over their lives. The implementation of school-based interventions in this crisis context addressed the need to foster children’s emotional well-being, coping strategies and reinforce their sense of agency.

School arts-based interventions in times of crisis

Schools are important pillars for providing emotional support and intervention in times of uncertainty (O’Keefe & McNally, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). One way to provide such support is through the implementation of school-based interventions aiming to promote coping and adaptive strategies in children, which are essential to mitigate helplessness and enhance agency (Murray & Ali, 2017). Schools can foster adaptation and agency by promoting meaning-making processes through the opening of spaces for children to express themselves and for hearing their voice in a structuring and nurturing environment (Papazian-Zohrabian & Mamprin, 2020). Because they provide a safe and playful space, arts-based interventions could be a promising avenue to provide psychological first aid to immigrant and refugee children and help them regain a sense of agency in a (post-)crisis context.

School arts-based interventions can support the well-being of immigrant and refugee children (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). Artistic expression have been found to foster hope, self-esteem, coping strategies and resilience in children, as well as contribute to the creation of meaning and the decrease of emotional and behavioural difficulties (Beauregard, 2014). This is also true in times of crises (Forggense, 2013; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). Indeed, creative endeavours act as a protective buffer for children and support their adjustment, since when making art, children explore different scenarios and are encouraged to develop their problem-solving skills and coping strategies (Berberian, 2019). These skills and strategies help foster a sense of agency in front of adversity (Glaveanu, 2015), which could be beneficial in the post-COVID context. Just like art, play helps children understand and control the world around them (Holmes et al., 2019; Vygotsky, 2004).

Puppets allow children to project themselves onto characters they choose to embody and through which they can express what they think or feel, or what worries or frighten them (Krøger & Nupponen, 2019). When they communicate through puppets, children can feel less threatened to share their experience indirectly. Indeed, puppets were found to reassure children in stressful situations (Golem et al., 2019; Remer & Tzuriel, 2015). The use of humour, often associated with puppets, may also help relieve some stress and gain the trust of children in anxiety-provoking situations (van der Hoeven et al., 2021). In fact, puppets are perceived as being non-judgemental peers, leading children to trust them more easily than adults) and facilitating the access to their inner world (Remer & Tzuriel, 2015). Conversely, children can also identify with elements of the story enacted by the puppets, which helps professionals to understand what is most salient to children or what difficulties they are currently experiencing (Korosec & Zorec, 2020; van der Hoeven et al., 2021). The addition of puppets in school arts-based intervention thus enhances a storytelling component which can nicely complement artistic expression. The following case study will illustrate how Mounia invested puppets in her art-making to help regain a sense of
The team implemented the Art & Storytelling program in six schools from three different cities in Canada (Montreal, Granby, and Sherbrooke). Depending on the city, immigrant and refugee children were either attending closed reception classes (i.e., Montreal and Sherbrooke) or were integrated into regular classrooms (i.e., Granby). In total, we obtained parental consent to participate in the research and collected data from more than 125 students attending 10 classes. As many reception class teachers get to know their students’ parents and develop a working alliance with them, we worked in close collaboration with teachers to help us explain the research to parents and answer their questions. In some schools there was also an intercultural school community worker who helped us in the recruitment process (which was the case in Mounia’s school) and the services of an interpreter were also offered upon request.

The Art & Storytelling program being integrated into the weekly course program, all children participated in the creative expression workshops. These follow a similar structure from week to week so that it encourages the creation of a ritualized framework as well as a sense of predictability and safety, necessary for children’s expression, but the structure remains flexible to adapt to the group’s needs (Beauregard, Caron, & Caldairou-Bessette, 2020; Beauregard, Rousseau, Benoit, & Papazian-Zohrabian, 2022). In spite of the pandemic context, only minor adaptations were needed so we could adhere to the sanitary measures imposed by the government and return to classrooms. Of these, workshop facilitators and children were required to wear a procedure mask and to sanitize their hands regularly. We thus applied this general structure to the creative expression workshops every week:

(1) As an opening ritual, the workshops begin with a short play time (5–10 min) to foster a relaxed and playful atmosphere and to create a break with the school space. Children can play games such as musical chairs, grandma’s footsteps or mirror a sound and a movement.

(2) A storytelling phase then follows (15–20 min) during which children sit in a circle. Depending on the moment of the program, either workshop facilitators tell a story or fairy tale to the group in an interactive way (first 4–5 workshops), or children are guided to visualize a character who learns that he or she must leave (following 2–3 workshops) or children share with their peers a story told by a significant person. The program includes stories to stir children’s imagination or to offer them a base on which to draw if they feel stuck.

(3) During the drawing period (20–25 min), children sit in groups of four. Workshop facilitators give one sheet of cartridge paper (12 × 18 in) and oil pastels to children and tell them they can draw whatever they want, be it related to the story they heard or not. Since the program is meant to be reproducible by the school milieu, only one artistic medium is offered. The choice was based on oil pastels’ affordability and on their potential to produce rich colours and textures, and to allow for various expressions.

(4) The workshops end with a closing ritual (5–10 min) during which children are invited to share verbally or symbolically their appreciation of the activities. They always have the choice to verbalize their ideas or to make a gesture. They can do so by placing what they liked in a treasure box, what they disliked in a garbage can and what they would like to change or transform in a recycling bin. This also facilitates going back to the school space.

During the workshops, we invite teachers to be present and to participate in the activities. When feeling comfortable, some can even lead part of the workshops (e.g., the rituals), with the support of workshop facilitators. In all cases, we encourage teachers to be genuinely curious about what children share, to actively listen to them and welcome their expression, without aiming for education or learning. And most of all, we insist that teachers follow their students’ pace, without pushing for disclosure if children are not ready to share their life experience.

Data collection and analysis

The team presents a case study taken from a larger qualitative research conducted in reception classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Closed reception classes aim to offer specialized support in learning the language of schooling (French) and in discovering the culture of the host society to non-native children born mostly abroad. The original research objective was to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based creative expression program, Art & Storytelling (Sherpa University Institute & TRIT, 2010) intended to improve the emotional well-being and school readiness of elementary school-aged refugee children. However, due to the context of the pandemic as well as the changing and pressing needs of the school environment, staff and students, the objective was readjusted to document 1) how immigrant and refugee children express their experience of the pandemic during the Art & Storytelling program and 2) if participation in the program fosters children’s empowerment and helps them regain a sense of agency. Ultimately, both objectives would allow us to document whether the creative expression program constituted a psychological first aid intervention that could be deployed in schools, in the context of a social health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of this article, we focus on the second objective and illustrate how participation in the Art & Storytelling program supported a 7-year-old refugee girl regain a sense of agency and control in this (post-)crisis context.

Art & Storytelling program

The Art & Storytelling program is a manualized program (Sherpa University Institute & TRIT, 2010) whose main objective is to support children in exploring their life experience (e.g. worries, dreams, emotions, etc.), creating meaning and regaining power. A team of researchers and clinicians created the program in the 90’s to respond to the pressing needs and as such, preceded the onset of the pandemic. However, since the aim of the program relates to the exploration of children’s daily life, the team thought that it could offer an interesting space for children to freely explore and express what they were going through. Indeed, our research has shown that the Art & Storytelling program fosters meaning-making in immigrant children, contributes to the expression and sharing of flexible plural identities, while having positive effects on emotional awareness, self-esteem as well as emotional and behavioural difficulties (Beauregard, Caron, & Caldairou-Bessette, 2020; Beauregard, Papazian-Zohrabian, & Rousseau, 2017a,b; Rousseau, Drapeau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2005; Rousseau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2003; Rousseau & Heusch, 2000).

The program consists in a series of 10 to 12 one-hour-long workshops, offered on a weekly basis to entire classes of children. It combines both storytelling and drawing activities and is based on the power of the arts to foster emotional expression and comprehension (Coholic & Eys, 2016; Kwong, 2016) as well as on its potential to address difficulties in a symbolic way (Avrahami, 2005). In the case of Mounia’s class, workshop facilitators were an art therapist and a psychologist from Columbia who was also the intercultural school community worker. Both had previous experience in working with immigrant and refugee children. Moreover, the art therapist had been running the program for several years and thus offered a short training to her co-facilitator about the clinical principles underpinning the Art & Storytelling program, the relevance of the intervention with immigrant and refugee children and the necessary know-how for running the workshops. As a complement to her training, the psychologist also watched a training video and read the manual before facilitating the first workshops (Sherpa University Institute & TRIT, 2010; Sherpa University Institute & TRIT Directors, 2013). Both workshop facilitators introduced puppets to facilitate communication with children, particularly during the storytelling phase of the
workshops. However, we collected qualitative data only for children whose parents consented to the research. We explained the research to the children before starting the intervention and invited them to sign the consent form to show their assent to participate. For these children, the two research assistants who also facilitated the workshops recorded field notes and photographed the images created by the children after each workshop. Individual notes focused on observations about each child’s comments, attitudes and relationships with their peers, teacher, and workshop facilitators as well as the story associated with the image created. Research assistants also wrote group notes documenting the course of the activity, how the group participated and its group dynamic. They also noted any specificities or peculiarities, such as any students’ absence or the presence of another school professional.

Toward the end of the Art & Storytelling program, researchers asked each workshop facilitator to identify children whose creative and psychological processes could be interesting in terms of empowerment and agency. Of all the cases thus identified, that of Mounia, a 7-year-old girl from Syria, stood out because of the importance the girl gave to the control. Also, puppets were not automatically used in every class and agency. Of all the cases thus identified, that of Mounia, a 7-year-old girl whose parents consented to the research. We explained the research to the workshop facilitators who, due to their prolonged engagement with the children, were at risk to experience persistent fears of separation and death. Despite initial shyness, Julie’s pupils had a lot of energy and participated generally well in all parts of the Art & Storytelling creative expression program, including the drawing period that they particularly invested. They were very excited when the workshop facilitators integrated puppets into the workshops, and most took the opportunity to hug them and to talk to them, sometimes in the language of their choice. Some even invented stories about them and integrated them in their creative process. This was the case of Mounia who interacted a lot with the different puppets and took care of them. The girl was particularly creative in how she invested the puppets to regain a sense of agency and control over her life.

Workshops #1 and #2 - Starting state: dispersion and disconnection

As an opening ritual for the first two sessions, workshop facilitators invited the children to greet each other in the language of their choice and to pass the baton by throwing an imaginary ball to one of their classmates. The workshops then unfolded with a storytelling period. For the beginning of the program, we opted for two short stories, that of the “Stone soup” (Muth, 2003) and that of the “King with dirty feet” (Clayton & Sanderson, 2018), two stories about sharing and relationships. While the children were rather reserved at first, they participated and contributed to the stories and drawing activities quite easily.

As a first image, Mounia made a drawing whose emanating atmosphere was positive. She identified elements such as a pumpkin or a house, but these were enumerated and not interrelated to each other or organized as a chain of events (Frost, 2005; Glaveau, 2015), we thought that the “dangerous” situation of the pandemic could be expressed in children’s drawings and that art-making could help children transform these dangers by invoking symbols of “protection” in their images which would also give us some information on their sense of agency. Accordingly, the theme of danger and protection was identified from the symbols we paid close attention to. However, two other themes emerged naturally from the data, one being dispersion and the other, manipulation and control. These themes were then counter-checked by another researcher to refine and validate the analysis and a first draft of this article was subsequently submitted to the workshop facilitators who, due to their prolonged engagement with children, could further increase the credibility of the researchers’ interpretations (Nowell et al., 2017).

Mounia: case study

Mounia (pseudonym) is a 7-year-old girl from Syria living in a midsize town of the province of Quebec (Canada). Since it is not mandatory for parents to declare their migratory status when they enroll their child in school, we do not know if Mounia was a child of refugees or not. Still, the relatively recent reception of many Syrian refugees in Canada and the social and economic conditions in Syria suggest that her family could have been in the process of applying for refugee status or could have already obtained this status when she entered school. Because the girl spoke Arabic and had not yet been educated in the Quebec school system, she attended a reception class which offers specific support for learning French (language of schooling) and for school and social integration, before being able to continue in a regular class (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport du Québec, 2014).

Julie’s class was a small and warm environment that supported a total of six children at the beginning of the program, ages six to eight, and coming from Syria (n = 4), Democratic Republic of Congo (n = 1) and Vietnam (n = 1). Of the six children, four were boys and two were girls. Of all the cases thus identified, that of Mounia, a 7-year-old girl whose parents consented to the research. We explained the research to the workshop facilitators who, due to their prolonged engagement with the children, were at risk to experience persistent fears of separation and death. Despite initial shyness, Julie’s pupils had a lot of energy and participated generally well in all parts of the Art & Storytelling creative expression program, including the drawing period that they particularly invested. They were very excited when the workshop facilitators integrated puppets into the workshops, and most took the opportunity to hug them and to talk to them, sometimes in the language of their choice. Some even invented stories about them and integrated them in their creative process. This was the case of Mounia who interacted a lot with the different puppets and took care of them. The girl was particularly creative in how she invested the puppets to regain a sense of agency and control over her life.

Workshops #3 - Connecting with the puppets

The third workshop marked the arrival in the program of Nina, a puppet who spoke Spanish and who was from Latin America. Workshop
facilitators first introduced puppets during the storytelling period, to tell a story that addressed more difficult and emotional themes. In this third session, they told the story of “Shô and the demons of the deep” (Galouchko, 1995), a story about being courageous to get rid of nightmares in a creative way. Interestingly, it also coincided with the moment when Mounia started to connect elements in her drawings to form a whole. Indeed, Mounia drew the house of Nina, the puppet (Fig. 3). Apart from the yellow sun in the lower right and the red dragon in the upper left, the colorful house occupied almost all the paper and the shapes she has drawn are contiguous and form a single entity. Mounia also drew her teacher Julie on the back of the paper (Fig. 4). After interacting a lot with the puppet during the workshop, hugging her and talking to her, the teacher character became the puppet towards the end of the activity. Even if some parts of the character’s body are less invested or disproportionate to the rest, they are nevertheless connected into a coherent whole. It might also be interesting to note that the character has a rectangular blue shape around the mouth, which may be the representation of a procedure mask, but Mounia did not comment on that. She did not comment neither on the reason why she wrote the numbers 1 and 2 in the eyes of the character. While this could have a personal meaning to the girl, the numbers could also be a way of practicing and mastering how to count and write numbers in French, the language she was learning.

Workshop #4 - Transferring her emotions on paper and attempting to control

The progression of themes in the stories continued the following week with the story of “Why the little pink elephant became sad and how he found a smile” (Weitze & Battut, 1999), that introduced the theme of saying goodbye to loved ones. The story was told by Amadou, a new puppet representing an African boy, and a tension, a feverishness was felt in the classroom during this time. In the case of Mounia, this frenzy resulted in covering her paper with scribbles (Fig. 5). Her teacher said that the image represented well the course of the week for the child, during which she had tantrums, cried, and sulked. This emotional intensity seems to have reproduced itself in the drawing process as the girl drew with intensity, making onomatopoeias such as “Whoosh! Whoosh!” (similar to a rushing sound or to a sound for getting rid of). Mounia told the workshop facilitators that she had drawn a flower that was growing, but it was no longer possible to see it since the child covered the sheet of paper with scribbles. The girl then ended the activity by folding her drawing saying that she wanted to hide it. She might have been ashamed of her drawing at that time, but folding the paper and hiding her image could have also been a way of controlling what could or could not be seen by others. If the growing flower represented her, then the scribbles maybe symbolized the wounded self. That is perhaps what she was hiding at that time and was not necessarily ashamed of her drawing but possibly expressed a lack of self-esteem. This incident also highlights the fact that symbolic expression through the arts can alone be sufficient in the construction of meaning and that sharing a creation with an adult can be mainly relational.

Workshop #5 - Representing danger and protection

For the fifth week, one of the workshop facilitators built a shelter in the classroom for the children (Fig. 6). They could all gather underneath it to listen to the story of “The shelter” (Qin & Claire, 2017) in which animals try to find shelter from an incoming storm with their neighbours. After the story, children went to draw all at the same table with the puppet Amadou. Most children created an image related to the story told and it was probably the workshop where they did it the most. This was also the case for Mounia who drew herself in her house, along with Amadou the puppet. Amadou was crying because he had no friends and
no house. He had come for protection in the house of Mounia because bad people were outside and wanted to hurt him (Fig. 7). In this image, we can observe that Mounia scribbled over one of the characters inside the house, which is seemingly her own representation, since the other character shows traces of what could be tears below the eyes and accordingly, must be Amadou. This theme of danger and protection reappeared later in the program, towards the end of the visualization phase.

**Workshops #6 to #9 - Expressing her need to regain control**

About halfway into the program, workshop facilitators led visualization sessions instead of telling stories. During these sessions, they invited children to imagine a character (human, animal, fictional, etc.) who learns that he or she must go on a journey before arriving in a new place. The entire visualization took four workshops: the first, to imagine the character; the second, the announcement and preparation for departure; the third, being the journey itself; and the fourth session, the arrival in the new place. During these periods, puppets were also used to guide children in creating their own story, asking them questions to help them imagine their character, environment, and actions. Despite visualization being new to children, they participated well and seemed to understand the purpose of the activity better and better as the program progressed. In the case of Mounia, she arrived late to the workshop and missed the first visualization, but she drew an image of hands (she also did this during workshop 8), the treatment of which is reminiscent of moving hands (Fig. 8). There are also two small figures in the drawings, that could look like insects.

The following week (workshop #7), Mounia did not wish to draw after the visualization period. To support the child in expressing herself, one of the workshop facilitators offered to draw with her, which she accepted. They drew mostly in silence except for the times when Mounia was directing and controlling the construction of the image. For instance, she told the art therapist what color to choose and what to do. Together, they drew a rainbow, each alternately contributing to a layer of the rainbow, but Mounia always remained in charge (Fig. 9). At the end, the child wrote her name and asked the art therapist to do the same beside two tiny stick figures (removed for confidentiality purposes).

The program had to stop for the Holidays, but the break was extended by another two weeks due to new socio-sanitary measures (COVID). When the program resumed five weeks later, the workshop facilitators continued with the visualization activity, inviting children to imagine their (or a) character arriving in a new place. In the ensuing period of drawing (workshop #8), Mounia drew hands like she did previously, in addition to an image representing a plane trip to puppet country (Fig. 10). Mounia shared that she was inside the plane, along with Amadou and Nina the puppets. Her parents, two children and a baby, just like the composition of her family, were also in the aircraft and they were all happy to go to puppet country. Like she did previously during workshop #3, the girl wrote numbers (1, 2 and 3) in the different boxes that included the members of her family. Mounia showed confidence by drawing this image without hesitation. She also decided to fold and crease her drawing at the end of the session, which made the image impossible to see without unfolding it. Like what she did during workshop #4, Mounia could have been controlling and deciding what she was willing to share with the others, and thus controlling the exposure of her inner world. However, this image could have also evoked memories of her leaving her home country and loved ones, which could have caused sadness that she may not have wanted to feel at that moment.

After the last visualization session (workshop #9), the child did not seem to create anything in relation to the theme proposed for the activity (arrival to the new place). She got to work as soon as she got back to her
place after story time. Standing on her feet, she seemed absorbed in what she was doing (drawing, cutting, gluing, folding), her body language being very dynamic. When she brought her drawing in, saying she was done, she immediately returned to add handles, which would help her hold her creation and control its manipulation (Fig. 11). She shared with the art therapist that she wanted to be like Nina the puppet and do what she does. When done, Mounia walked around with her drawing and made noises as if it were a car. This process of transforming her image was also repeated two weeks later, during workshop #11.

Workshop 10 - Controlling the villain to protect herself

Towards the end of the Art & Storytelling program, workshop facilitators invited the children to ask their parents or caregivers, to tell them a story (real or fictional) which they could then tell the class. Most children brought back children’s stories like “The little prince” or “The three little pigs” and shared them with their classmates through videos, drawings, or stories. As soon as she got to her place during workshop #10, Mounia got to work and drew a scene representing a bad guy stealing money from Nina and Amadou, the puppets (Fig. 12). She included herself in the drawing, along with two other classmates and the police. Because the villain was mean to the puppets, she spanked him, and this led to his arrest by the police. She also included what seems to be random letters at the top of her image, the calligraphy of which she could have been practising.

Workshop #11 - Opening piece by piece

After hearing the story of “The little Moon raven” (Pfister, 2014), a story about difference, similar to that of “The ugly duckling” (Di Lernia, 2019), Mounia transformed and hid again her drawing of what seemed to be a character saying “I love, I’m a virresu [virus?]” (Figs. 13 and 14). It is unclear what she meant to illustrate as she did not share her intent with the workshop facilitators and the lettering is not always very clear (it could have been vibresu and not virresu, for instance). Still, she put as much intensity into it that time as two weeks before: she folded and cut the image, which had the effect of restricting what the others could see by pulling up pieces of paper.

Workshop #12 - Saying goodbye to the puppets

While the last workshop was to be offered, it had to be postponed for a week because one of the workshop facilitators was sick. When the children learned about the postponement, one of them was so sad that he could not talk to the puppets that the team decided to greet the children by videoconference. We also based our decision on the importance of closing the sessions properly, which was also particularly important for immigrant and refugee children who may have suffered loss due to the migration process but also due to the pandemic (Papazian-Zohrabian & Mamprin, 2020; Papazian-Zohrabian, Mamprin, & Lemire, 2020). For this call, one of the puppets was sick and the other was taking care of her. Just seeing the puppets through the computer screen enlightened the children and probably reassured them that the workshop facilitators would return the following week, which made them more willing to wait for the final workshop. For the ultimate workshop, the facilitators dressed up the puppets to tell the story of “The paper bag princess” (Munsch & Martchenko, 2018), a princess who had lost everything to the attack of a dragon and who defied it. While most children in the class seemed to want to take advantage of this final period of drawing in the program, Mounia quickly made a drawing representing the beloved puppets to be able to spend more time manipulating them (Fig. 15). She talked to them as if they were her friends. The child also shared with the
group about the moments she spent with the puppets during the Art & Storytelling program, as if saying goodbye to them and preparing for the separation.

Discussion

Puppets are generally appealing to children who trust them more easily to share their experience with them (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019), which may explain why Mounia bonded easily to Nina and Amadou during the Art & Storytelling program. However, how the girl invested the puppets, in an intensive and creative demeanour, and how they were integrated into art-making deserves to be underlined, especially in terms of meaning-making process and sense of agency.

From dispersion to meaning-making

When Mounia started the program, she was talking and interacting little with her peers and the workshops facilitators. This low degree of interaction was also apparent in the images she created during the workshops, as she tended to enumerate elements in her drawings without seemingly connecting them in a story (Figs. 1 and 2). Indeed, in the first phase of the Art & Storytelling program, Mounia seems to have struggled to create a coherent whole, to find meaning in the drawings she was making. Elements in her drawings gave the impression of floating and of being scattered in the space. While we cannot discount the fact that the girl may have been exploring the materials during these first workshops or that she may not have known or understood what was expected of her, it is possible to suppose that these first creations reflected how the girl was feeling at the beginning of the program. Indeed, art creations reflect the inner world of children, which is represented through symbols and metaphors (Anzieu et al., 2021; Coholic & Eys, 2016). At that time, she may have been struggling to understand and make sense of her experience or feeling unsafe to disclose her experience, because of both avoidance strategies, lack of trust in unknown adults or feeling she should not overwhelm them in stressful times.

While we have no information about what was going on at home with her family, schools and school staff were still recovering and adjusting to the context of the pandemic in the fall of 2020. Indeed, a meta-analysis concluded that elementary school teachers experienced higher level of anxiety during the pandemic (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). Like what was happening in many homes, the anxiety experienced by school staff probably disrupted the dynamics in the school milieu and the meaning-making processes of children like Mounia (Rousseau & Miconi, 2020).

As soon as we introduced puppets in the Art & Storytelling program (from the third workshop), workshop facilitators noticed a change in the girl’s behaviours and creations. The relationship with Nina the puppet was instantaneous: Mounia immediately started talking to her and hugging her. As puppets are known to be good ice breakers to build rapport with children (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019), the arrival of Nina could also have helped the young girl to share about her drawings with the workshop facilitators, something she had not done yet. Interestingly, the story she first shared was about the puppet’s home. Perhaps Mounia felt less threatened to share about her creation because the presence of the puppet in the classroom reassured her on the one hand. On the other hand, the puppet could also have given her the opportunity to indirectly share her experience, adding an extra layer of distance, through the story of the puppet in her drawing (Golem et al., 2019). Comforted by the presence of the puppet, the girl might have begun to make sense of her experience, this also coinciding with her drawings representing elements of a story and forming a coherent whole (Fig. 3).

The team also noticed how the arrival of the puppet in the program concurred with the girl filling up the space of her paper. This could have been a way for Mounia to express and project her overflow of emotions onto the paper, see them and become aware of them, thus supporting her in understanding her experience and making sense of it (Beauregard, Caron, & Caldairou-Bessette, 2020). In this sense, the fourth workshop may have marked the beginning of the symbolization process in which she began to regain a sense of agency and control over her life.

Opening to her inner world and towards a transformation of helplessness

The use of puppets seems to have opened up a space in the classroom where Mounia felt safe to express herself and where she gradually exposed herself to others (Remer & Tzuriel, 2015). Combined with art-making, this might have supported Mounia in expressing what she was going through. The world she shared with others was one filled with dangers for the puppets but also one in which Mounia acted as a protective agent. Indeed, during the fifth workshop, the image she made was about Amadou, the puppet, who was crying because he was...
Mounia and her creation (Fig. 11) could illustrate the beginning of agency and control, hands being used to pick up or hold things (Chevalier, 2020) and this could imply that the girl was taking control of the evil within her, thereby protecting herself. The drawing could also have represented a scene from real life that she experienced or heard about, but that she transformed in order to take on an active role. In both cases, Mounia chose a role in which she might feel powerful, the girl protecting the puppets who did her good and showing some empowerment by spanning the villain, so that the police could arrest him. Doing so may have also been a way of hiding her inner world, which could have harboured a duality between good and evil, which she could have been ashamed of or wanted to control. Furthermore, in the event she drew a virus and that she meant to write “I love, I’m a virus” during workshop #11 (Fig. 13), we may note that she also drew an image evocative of a duality between good (being good to people by loving them) and evil (making people sick or even killing them by being a virus). This may have helped her regain a sense of agency on her life, as art-making fosters the integration of polarities (Hamel, 2021).

As the Art & Storytelling program progressed, we noted that elements of control were appearing in Mounia’s creative process and the images she made. Indeed, she drew hands twice during the program (Figs. 8 and 10). Mounia could have invited the workshop facilitators to enter her inner world as hands are used to greet people. The drawings could also be related to agency and could have evoked a desire for action, power and control, hands being used to pick up or hold things (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1997). Even though drawing hands could have been a way to integrate the idea that the hands of adults were manipulating the puppets, focusing on hands may have also allowed Mounia to understand that it was possible to control one’s life and actions just as it was possible to control the puppets. Moreover, the child used strategies to hide or control what she shared with others from session 4 on. These strategies included covering her image with scribbles to mask it (Fig. 5), folding her drawings to hide her creation (Figs. 5 and 10), folding, cutting, and pasting the paper to create something new and adding handles to facilitate manipulation (Figs. 11 and 13). Not showing her creation to the adults or children around her was perhaps a way of taking power and control over her inner world, by choosing to whom she would give access to it. It may also have been a way of gaining control over potentially traumatic intrusions, thus becoming less vulnerable. The fact that she hid her images by folding the paper but lifting pieces of it, could be the start of an opening, as Mounia carefully chose the parts of herself she wanted to reveal to the art therapists. Mounia thus seems to play out repeatedly her ambivalence towards disclosure, she wishes to share it but also feels she has to do so. She goes back and forth, practicing with the puppets and subsequently opening up progressively and withdrawing with the adults in the room.

At this point, after expressing herself and starting to make sense of her experience, Mounia may have wanted to understand and control the world around her by playing with her drawings (Holmes et al., 2019; Vygotsky, 2004). For instance, the symbol of the car, embodied by Mounia and her creation (Fig. 11) could illustrate the beginning of movement, evocative of a transformation of helplessness into a recovery of agency. Indeed, art-making supports children in the exploration of different scenarios, which also helps them develop their problem-solving skills, coping strategies and sense of agency (Berberian, 2019; Glaveanu, 2015). The image is also interesting because the young girl took the initiative to transform her drawing by cutting, pasting, and folding it, an option that no child ever chose before in our workshops, but an option that also allowed her to control what she wanted to share. Through these strategies, the child could have been exploring different ways to control what the others could see or not.

Mounia also started to express this renewed sense of agency in her behaviours when she was creating. One example of this is when she created a rainbow with one of the workshop facilitators (Fig. 9). The rainbow has been a widespread symbol of protection during the pandemic. Accordingly, this image could both recall the layers of protection that the child put in place and those that the art therapist added at the child’s request. However, how the image was made and above all, how the child took control of the process directing the art therapist and telling her what to do, could illustrate how Mounia was practicing regaining control over her life and beginning to rebuild herself. This may have been possible because the image was made with the other, illustrating how the girl needed someone to hold her emotions and support her in her process, allowing Mounia to safely explore and integrate more difficult experience (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). We also observed how confident and assertive Mounia became when creating towards the end of the program, which could illustrate a transformation of helplessness into a recovered sense of agency. Interestingly, at this point, the child was now experimenting with creating and manipulating her own puppet, participating both in its personification and in the creation of a character with which she could identify.

**Strengths and limitations**

The case of Mounia gives us important insight into how an immigrant child, in a post-COVID period, uses puppets and art-making to create layers of protection around her. This protection seems to have given her the emotional safety she needed to be able to explore the duality inside her, which may have been provoked, among others, by her migration process but also the instability in her surroundings. However, there are many information missing about the particularities of her migration process, its impact on her family and how the latter was coping with the COVID crisis. First, apart from the country of origin (Syria) which could suggest that Mounia and her family were refugees in Canada, we did not have any confirmation of this as it is not compulsory to disclose the immigration status upon school registration. While immigrants and refugees share a similar experience of cultural uprooting and identity dilemmas that are similar to those of voluntary immigrant children, refugee children experience a unique predicament (Herati & Meyer, 2020). Knowing this information could have informed differently our interpretations of Mounia’s creative process on one part, but also our understanding of how the pandemic may have affected her family on another part. Since the pandemic was rarely evoked directly in her drawings or the stories she shared with the workshop facilitators, it is difficult to know if what she expressed was related to the pandemic, to migratory adversity or to both of them. However, there are clear symbols of danger, both graphic and narrative, that allowed her to symbolise adversity.

Furthermore, the workshop facilitators spent time in her class, going in every week from October 2020 to February 2021 for a full hour. The relative smallness of her class (between 6 and 8 children) gave them time to observe and reflect on her evolution, record field notes, and thus gain a better understanding of the child. But regardless of the attention workshop facilitators paid to record their observations, it should be noted that they could not spend the whole hour of the workshop with Mounia and that they could have missed important information, either verbal or non-verbal, that she shared with her peers or with the teacher. This would have given us insight into what she intended to represent in
her drawings or how she interpreted it herself. Indeed, even though we
tried to be as objective as possible, our interpretation of Mounia’s
process represents the researchers’ subjectivity and should therefore be
considered with caution. This case study represents nonetheless a
credible construction of the perspective gained through the images
Mounia made, what she shared about them, the art therapist’s and
psychologist’s observations and the researchers’ angle, all this sup-
ported by relevant literature.

Although analysing a single case like Mounia allows for a deeper
understanding of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2017), it is
important to remember that the results of this study are not transferable
to all immigrant and refugee students. While the team collected a rela-
tively large amount of qualitative data from over 125 children in 10
classes from three different cities, we did not complete a cross-sectional
analysis of the entire body of data. This would have given us a better
understanding of how children expressed their experience of the
pandemic and how the creative expression programs fostered children’s
empowerment and helped them regain a sense of agency. This more
nuanced understanding would also have helped to highlight what, in
Mounia’s case, might have been similar to the experience of other
newcomer students while also highlighting what was unique to her own,
and thus strengthen the transferability of the study (Drapeau, 2004).
In the same line of thought, the research team also collected quantitative
data about children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties (Strengths
and Difficulties Questionnaire – SDQ (Goodman, 1997)), but these were
left aside due to the research transformation in the pandemic context.
The collection and inclusion of these data would have added another
perspective on the case of Mounia.

Conclusion

As a child who emigrated to Canada just prior to the onset of the
COVID-19 pandemic, Mounia’s experience may have led to feelings of
uprooting and helplessness that were exacerbated by the social and
health crisis. Her process during the Art & Storytelling program evokes
how she was able to find balance between helplessness and the will to
to control her life and her environment and how she evolved into a
regulated sense of agency by creating meaning. Indeed, Mounia was able
to explore a space between “unbearable” helplessness and “impossible”
control, and she did so using puppets combined with art-making. The
process is illustrated in the symbols and metaphors invoked in the cre-
ations but also in the way she invested the creative process and trans-
formed her creations. Mounia’s creations could be beautiful analogies of
her transformation during the workshops, illustrating the contribution
of puppets and art-making to the restoration of coping strategies in
children. Although we did not focus the analysis of her case specifically
on psychological first aid, the impact of the Art & Storytelling program
on Mounia’s coping strategies, suggests that implementing similar creative
school-based interventions, offering a space allowing children to express
themselves in an environment providing listening and comfort, could be
a relevant way of offering psychological first aid in a (post-)crisis context, and this could be explored in subsequent research.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Papazian-Zohrabian Garine: Writing – review & editing, Formal
analysis, Data curation. Rousseau Cécile: Writing – review & editing, Valida-
tion, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodol-
ogy, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. Beau-
regard Caroline: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft,
Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodol-
gy, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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