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# Drawing together hope: 'listening' to militarised children

## SUMMARY

- Art can be used as both a therapeutic tool and a communication tool.
- Art has been used with refugees/militarised children but has tended to focus on their pathology.
- Art in this study was used to explore children's hopes for their future.
- Children talk more when they are/have drawn what they are trying to describe.
- Art can be used to understand children's world-view and explore their beliefs and opinions.

**KEY WORDS:** Art, Child Soldiers, Methodologies, Refugees, Resilience

## USE OF ART IN RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

The act of drawing for children is an integral part of play and is something that is generally enjoyed by children of all ages. When provided with materials most children will draw. Art has also been used as a diagnostic tool for intellectual or emotional development, as a therapeutic tool and as a communication tool to understand children's world-view and explore their beliefs and opinions. This paper will explore its use with unaccompanied (separated from parents/orphaned) refugee and militarised (living and working with military) children in exploring their world-views.

Some psychologists have attempted to use art to determine intellectual or emotional status of children. Machover (1949) developed the classic personality test also based on children's drawings of a person. Art has been used extensively to diagnose psychological disturbance in children but Cox (1992) suggests that evidence indicates that whilst drawings may be a reliable global assessment of a child's emotional adjustment, they cannot give any indication of specific strengths or weaknesses. Children's age and ability will affect what they draw and whilst children themselves may understand what and why they have drawn something, adult interpretation is highly subjective, leading many psychologists to question the value of projective drawing measures with children. Nevertheless, as Pridmore and Bendelow (1995) suggest, the emphasis of

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psychologists in using art has tended to be on diagnosing abnormality and non-conformity. Nevertheless, a number of professionals have begun to recognise the use of drawing in dialogue with children, specifically when trying to find out children's opinions and understandings of situations.

Art therapy is generally associated with the Freudian psychoanalytic theory; that confrontation and expression of blocked and suppressed feelings is therapeutic (Freud, 1976). It is felt that children might gain some relief from drawing in dealing with the underlying tensions generated by being in situations of conflict. Erickson (1968) took Piaget's theory of assimilation (bringing order and control to poorly understood feelings) through play, to propose the possibility of deliberately recreating different situations with children using, for example, drawings and drama. Goodwin (1982) suggests that art enables severely traumatised children to communicate in ways that they might be unable or unwilling to do verbally. However, Thomas and Silk (1990) state that no controlled evaluations have been conducted to demonstrate that expression of emotion in art is, in fact, therapeutic for children. However, interest in art as a therapy has increased due to the process of drawing being recognised as a powerful means of overcoming communication barriers.

Psychological benefits of drawing traumatic events they have been exposed to may or may not be therapeutic to children. However, Gross and Hayne (1998) suggest that:

*"drawing can be used to facilitate children's ability to talk about events, particularly those events they might otherwise find difficult to describe or understand".*

Pridmore and Bendelow (1995) suggest that:

*"using children's drawings in conjunction with writing or dialogue can be a powerful method of exploring the beliefs of young children,"*

They further emphasise the ethical advantage of using these child-centred approaches, which incorporate children's own ideas, beliefs and metaphors.

Rae's (1991) research with children suggests that drawings facilitate discussion about children's emotional reaction to hospitalisation. Butler *et al.*, (1995) found that of the children aged between three and five years old experiencing the same event (a visit to a fire station), the half who did drawings reported significantly more information than the half who did not. Drucker *et al.*, (1997) used drawings to interview five to nine year old children of substance abusers, asking them to describe a recent incidence. Children who were asked to draw reported, more than three times as much information, as those who were only asked to tell. Further research with children on their emotional experiences by Gross and Hayne (1998) found that:

*"children given the opportunity to draw while talking about their emotional experiences reported (twice) more information than children merely asked to tell".*

Friere (1972) uses pictures with learners to find out what concerns the learners themselves had rather than as visual aids and Linney (1994) has used this extensively in a people centred approach which:

*"goes beyond mere participation towards a fuller involvement of local people in their own development".*

Drawing of maps has been used with children in Nepal to find out their daily tasks and activities and the resources of the area (Johnson *et al.*, 1995). In Woodhead's multi-cultural research project (1998) with working children from a wide range of jobs:

*"young people were encouraged to represent their feelings and beliefs in whatever way most meaningful to them, including drawings, mapping, role play as well as group discussion".*

Perhaps the significant point here is that children had control over the methodology.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) it is every child's right to be able to communicate and art is seen as one means of communication. Article 13 says that children have *"the right to freedom of expression, to be able to impart information and ideas of all kinds by all means including in the form of art"*. As importantly, Article 12 says that children have a *"right to be heard and their opinions to effect any decisions that impact them"*.

### MILITARISED CHILDREN IN SE ASIA

There is much criticism about the psycho-social interventions for children affected by war (see Tolfree, 1996; Petty and Bracken, 1998) Therapeutic models that are used are seen as inappropriate:

*"both in terms of their cost and human resource requirements, as well as their basic assumptions about the nature and effects of trauma and who constitutes a vulnerable group" (Boyden and Gibbs, 1997).*

The focus is often in counselling over the traumas of the past. The intention here was to explore beyond the past and the present and into the future by looking at children's hopes portrayed in their drawings. Psychologists tend to focus on the negative aspects of our mental lives such as helplessness, hopelessness and despair probably because of the clinical interest in depression (Lazarus, 1999). Furthermore, the construction we make of children, especially in developing countries, and especially those in conflict situations is often as 'helpless and hopeless'. Professional interest has tended to focus on vulnerability and meeting psychological needs rather than resilience and building on strengths. It is about what adults must do for children rather than what children can do for themselves and others. Hope is seen to lead to action to seek improvement of an unsatisfactory situation. In working with children whose future is before them; how can hope be fostered?

Little research seems to have been done about hope. To hope is to believe that something positive, which does not presently apply to one's life, could still materialise. Hope is also considered to be one of three (the others being faith and love) key Christian principles indicating its spiritual dimension. Kilbourn (1995) suggests that restoring hope is key to the recovery of war-traumatised children. It has been suggested that a traumatic event or series of events can take children to a situation where they block out the past and the future and focus only on the present. Lazarus (1999) suggests that hope is in fact an in-built coping resource against despair. In a situation where we feel we want to do something to improve the situation, could most children have the resources within themselves? On the other hand could encouraging children to draw their expectations for the future actually foster hope as they consider future possibilities?

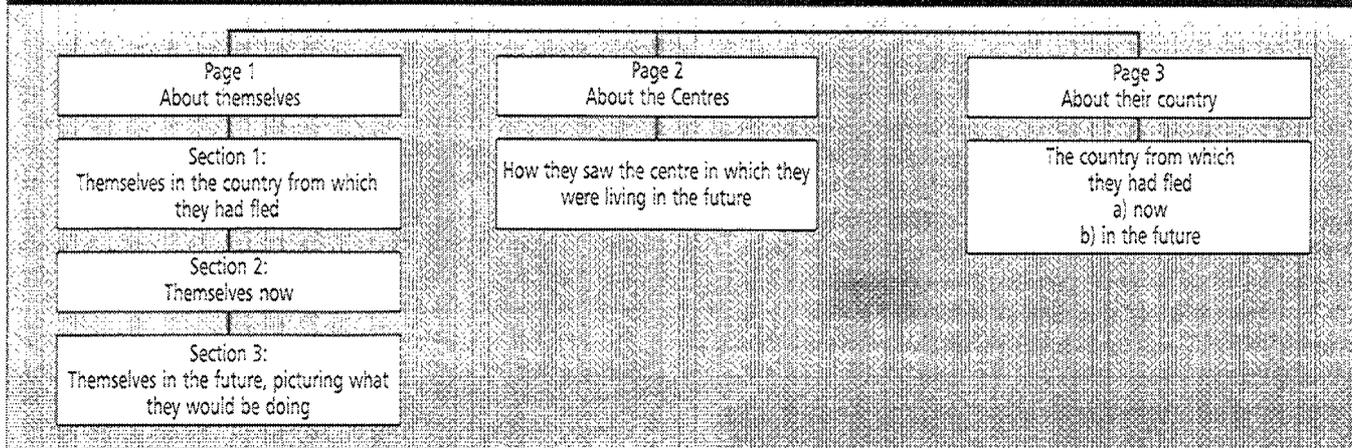
Even apart from potential psychological benefits, using drawings with children is an effective way of finding out a wide range of information. The aim of the research was to understand children's perceptions of hope for the future of themselves, the project and their state/country so that the programme could be developed accordingly.

The researcher was conducting an external evaluation of the programme as a consultant so the time available to do the research and form a relationship with the children was limited to days. It is recognised that in a short programme of this kind the actual use of information generated could be tokenistic but it is hoped that it will be the start of a process of awareness among the staff of the importance and ways of listening to children.

### Sample

The research was conducted with all 60 children in the Centres: 52 boys and 8 girls, aged 9-16 years, were invited to participate and all did. They were all unaccompanied (without accompanying parents) refugee children located in two Centres in SE Asia. The location is confidential. Some

Figure 1: Sets of pictures children were asked to draw



children had been militarised (living and working with the resistance army) for up to six years.

**Background**

In preliminary semi-structured interviews with Centre leaders, it was explained that the resistance military army had often picked the children up as refugees separated from their families in the looting and burning of their villages. Some children had seen the torture and killing of family members and friends. Many children’s parents had been killed and, due to the insecure nature of the region, it was not always possible for the remaining parents to be located.

The resistance army used the children to work for them in gathering food from the forest, cooking, being porters, carrying weapons and later being trained in weapon use. Some children had been trained as snipers. Ongoing destabilisation of their home State meant that provision of education and health care had been severely limited for most children. Children were being forcibly conscripted into the Government army (which the resistance was fighting against). Furthermore, the neighbouring country to which they would need to flee was not welcoming and refused to give refugee status. In one sense the care by the resistance group of the children was an act of mercy as the alternative might have been to leave them to die in the jungle.

The resistance military group is not one favoured by the international community and therefore receives little support. With an established reputation for opium smuggling, the resistance was keen to promote an improved image at an international political level. They are aware that the UN (1989) strongly suggests that children, especially those under 16 years, should not be militarised. They had therefore invited a Development Agency to help provide accommodation and education for the 60 children, which was how the two Centres were established. The intention being that more children would be ‘made available’ as the programme develops and resources established.

**Method**

This research project was undertaken independently and self financed. Whilst it was not submitted to an ethics committee, ethical concerns were considered. It is recognised that in doing ethical research, there is a need to give chil-

dren the freedom not to be involved. This is not easy in a situation where to withdraw in front of the group might lead to loss of face, a particular concern in SE Asia. However, it was felt that the method of drawing and the openness of what was required gave children the opportunity to draw as much or as little as they liked. There was recognition that bringing up the past might be painful for some children. However there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that children drawing traumatic events cause further trauma and much psychological theory (though little evidence) to indicate the opposite is true.

The research was conducted in the children’s familiar ‘breeze block’ classroom. Children were not forbidden from looking at their colleagues’ work but this was not encouraged. The children were asked to draw three sets of pictures (see Figure 1).

After the exercise children were individually asked to explain what they had drawn. Then the drawings were discussed with key staff.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Pictures about themselves**

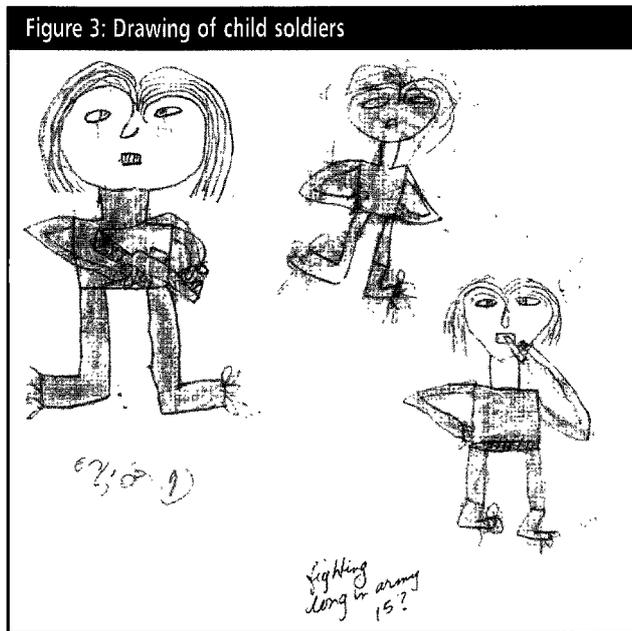
Most children had ideas about what they wanted to do in the future (see Figure 2). Out of 52 unaccompanied refugee boys, 24 boys indicated in their drawings (usually through holding guns but sometimes in uniform) that they had been ‘soldiers’ in the past (see Figure 3). Twenty-two boys drew themselves as soldiers in the future but interestingly, 13 boys who had been soldiers drew themselves as ‘something else’. Thirteen of the boys who had been ‘something else’ drew themselves as soldiers in the future, leaving only 11 boys who drew themselves as soldiers in

Figure 2: Indications from drawings of previous and future work.

Past	Future
13 soldiers	Something else
Something else	11 soldiers
11 soldiers	11 soldiers
Total: 24 soldiers	Total: 22 soldiers

the past that drew themselves as soldiers in the future (usually in a higher rank denoted by epaulettes).

Other children drew themselves as farmers/buffalo herders in the past, rather than students even though others had been pupils for varying time spans, perhaps because of the disruption to school. Significantly none of the children chose to be farmers in the future. Some of the children drew themselves in the future as teachers (n=9)(see Figure 4), preachers/evangelists (n=7)(see Figure 5) and other jobs (e.g., doctor, politician). Most children drawing themselves in the present picture drew themselves as pupils but several drew themselves with their hands up in worship, which could indicate the importance of their new found faith.



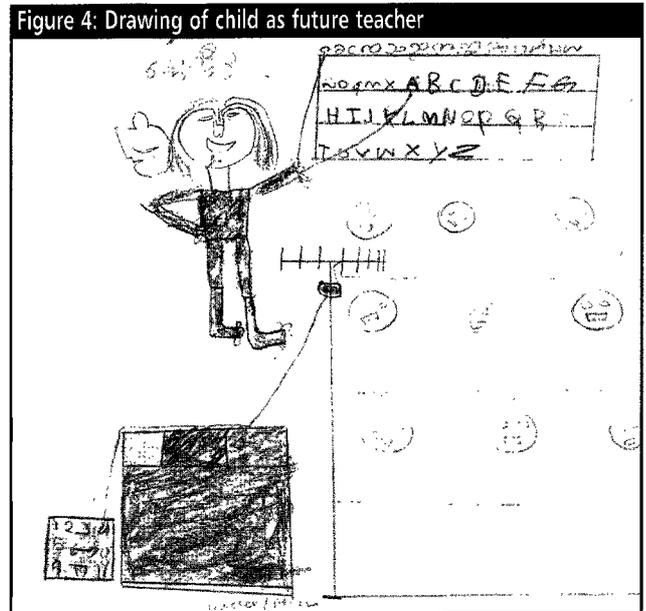
One child drew a picture of a brother in the past picture who was absent in pictures of the present and future. When the child was asked about this, expecting they had been killed, they responded that the brother was in fact in the other centre for unaccompanied children, and thus separated from them. In this case it led to a reunion between siblings but it illustrates the importance of a non-intimidating open dialogue between adults and children. Children and particularly former child soldiers might consider that direct requesting of adults could lead to discipline, even though the intention of the adults might be opposite, which indicates yet again that clarification is vital.

### Pictures about the Centres

Most of the children drew pictures of a bigger better centre with, for example, a school for accompanied, refugee children from the locality, increased sports facilities and a guesthouse, perhaps indicating the value they placed on guests from outside in developing relationships with the children. The drawings were generally positive and hopeful.

### Pictures about their country

Children drew some disturbing pictures of their country, as they perceived it now, clearly in a war situation. Some



of the pictures illustrated some of the traumas the children had been exposed to, such as being driven out of a burning village and being witness to torture and killings. One child drew the picture of a tiger caught in a thorn bush, wounded but fighting to get free. The tiger depicted is a mascot/symbol of his people and was a graphic illustration of the situation of his people. Instructions to one teacher were misunderstood and she originally asked boys to write a narrative of the situation of their country now and in the future. Some of these were translated and it was fascinating to see that the children's written descriptions of the situation reflect the melancholic nature of 'resistance' songs and poems. However, the drawings gave a more hopeful picture of the future with multiple colourful high-rise buildings, roads and cars, contrasting with the thick green jungle of the current conflict location. Significantly no children drew pictures of the future being the same situation as the past and none drew themselves as farmers in the future.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The only adults who could translate were the children's teachers who were also refugees. It is recognised that they may have affected what the children drew. At the time it was not considered to be a concern although in retrospect this may have affected what the children drew. Further issues of confidentiality may have become more explicit had there been representatives of the army present who could take individual results back to commanders in the resistance. This might have created problems for children who, for example, did not want to be soldiers in the future.

There was concern that children might not want to express that they wanted to be soldiers again in the future if they perceived that we in any way disapproved of this. Although the author is pacifistic, this was not expressed in any way beforehand and the children appeared not to have been influenced in their responses, but this might have been a concern. Nevertheless, it is recognised that these and many other children in developing countries do not normally have choices about their future occupations as chil-

dren do in the West and this might have influenced their responses.

It is also recognised that work is only one part of the overall picture of what "I did, am and will be doing" and the emphasis on it should not distract from building on other strengths and weaknesses. A healthy emphasis on education and vocational training does not mean all needs are being met.

Written answers are small and less easy to copy whereas drawings are bigger and can be seen more easily by other children, so what was drawn by the quicker, more skilled or creative children may have been copied by their peers. However, as children have worked with and are likely to be influenced by their peers then perhaps it is a Western construct to want children to do everything separately. The quality of drawing varied considerably; some were immature for their age probably due to lack of opportunities of using drawing materials but all children were able to draw something and then were given the opportunity to explain what they had drawn. However, older children with immature drawings did appear to be less comfortable and perhaps embarrassed by this, even though they were encouraged at the beginning that they were not being tested for their skill or that there were right answers.

Listening to children in research may be criticised as 'taking children too seriously' even using traditional methodologies but using children's pictures seems too easy to really be taken seriously by the academic community and may be why relatively little has been done in this area.

On the other hand children's drawings of war and violence can attract much attention by journalists for their almost voyeuristic qualities but the danger is that this further exploits children and portrays them as helpless and hopeless.

In asking children what they had drawn very little time was given with each child due to the time constraints. It is recognised that much more information might have been gained had more time been available. A fuller understanding of the children's context might also have been achieved. However, this exercise does enable participation and dialogue and this may be of itself useful although it is recognised that children need to be much more involved in the process to say they have truly participated. This is only possible where more time is allowed for the research. A longitudinal research project, seeing how children's hopes are realised or not and whether children expressing hope proved to be more resilient, would be helpful.

### CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENT METHODOLOGIES

It is recognised that asking children to *vocalise* their responses is limited because children's vocabulary is limited

according to their age and ability. Children's ability to articulate their opinions and feelings is not the same as adults and is therefore open to misinterpretation. Adults may intimidate children, therefore access to information they have may be restricted. Children may prefer not to disclose information in a face-to-face interview that they might disclose in an anonymous self-written questionnaire or other non-directive methodology. Children may also have insufficient time to give a considered response. Nevertheless, asking children to write responses to open-ended questions is also limited because children's ability to write depends on their literacy, age and ability. They may feel that their writing ability is being tested and feel intimidated thus affecting what information is given. Written questions cannot be as easily clarified as verbal questions and therefore need extensive piloting. Questions written by adults often

fail to address children's own world-view, experience and explanations.

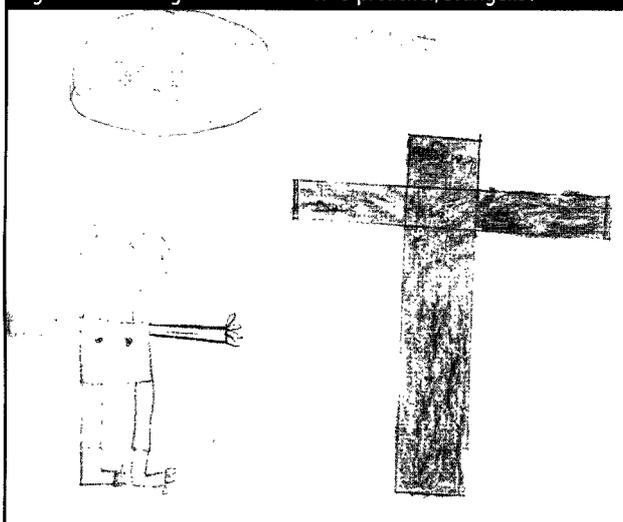
Children's drawing responses can be positive because drawing is seen as fun for the children (and researcher). Drawing may enable children to relax and concentrate their thoughts: acting as a catalyst for responding and breaking down communication barriers. Asking children to draw responses only can be limited because children may be seen to fabricate events in the process of drawing, as they are often encouraged to in artistic expression of ideas. It may be better

for children to interpret their drawings themselves rather than rely on adult interpretations. Children may feel their drawing ability is limited and be embarrassed to show it to adults, thus affecting the ability to draw and the resulting actual drawing then draw what they find easiest rather than what they want to communicate. There will also be cross-cultural variations of what children draw.

Pridmore and Bendelow (1995) and Pridmore (1996) suggest that the draw-and-write technique increases information because drawing enables all children to participate. It enables researchers to treat children as subjects rather than objects. It enables children to have time to reflect and gain control over their own ideas. Children can express ideas for which they do not have words and then seek help to write about these ideas. It allows for the study of difference and range rather than seeing children as a homogeneous group.

McGregor *et al.*, (1998) used the draw-and-write technique with primary school children's views of health in schools and non-response was not a problem. Researchers are able to detect inter and intra school differences and similarities in response. Researchers are able to use it in tandem with a questionnaire to complement and triangulate. Gross and Hayne (1997) suggest that the reasons for an increase in information using the draw-and-tell technique

Figure 5: Drawing of child as future preacher/evangelist



are that drawing helps children feel more comfortable and relaxed, in an unfamiliar situation. Drawing may facilitate memory retrieval. Drawing helps children to arrange or organise their narratives, allowing the opportunity to tell a better story. Collins *et al.*, (1998) suggest other advantages of the draw-and-tell technique used in their study of pre-school children and sun protection. Even though children may have drawn a scribble, to the child this has meaning that can be discussed. All children are able to describe their picture and give answers in response to questions asked by the researcher. Research provides quantifiable data, which can be used in programme development. The research takes a short time to administer, is relatively easy to analyse and is able to provide reliable data.

Backett-Milburn and McKie (1999) describe some of the disadvantages of this technique. Drawing requires knowledge of appearance and structure of subjects or objects to be drawn and skill (children become more skilful in drawing as they get older). Children's drawings cannot be regarded as direct translations of mental states and images on paper. Children (and adults) will reproduce pictures of dominant discourses in the culture. The fact that children can produce drawings and statements about topics can mask critical reflection on what these data actually mean and how the research process has affected this. Analysis is often done quantitatively when it is really a qualitative methodology.

## CONCLUSION

The general impression of what children had drawn in this study was that they were hopeful about the future, even though there are currently no political and social indications that things are likely to improve. They are currently what amounts to illegal refugees, not accepted by their host country and unable to return to their own country. This exercise appeared to help understand children's sense of hope for the future. It gave specific information on some aspects of how the programme could be developed in the future such as ideas for physically developing the centre and its facilities. It provided a launch pad to discuss and develop vocational training opportunities, and it gave staff working with the children further insights into how the children themselves were thinking. The staff and teachers recognised that these insights added to their understanding of specific children and the group as a whole. It also encouraged the staff about the importance of communication. The children seemed to enjoy the activity of drawing and appreciated that somebody was interested in their opinions and their personal future and the future of their people. It may be useful to repeat the exercise in a year's time to compare whether the boys' hopes have changed.

Using drawings in this way seemed to be a useful and fairly quick way to gain a lot of information in a short period of time. This is important where research time is short. However, the author felt that much more information could have been achieved with more time and that, apart from the controversial psychological benefits, using art was a useful tool to opening up communication between children and adults.

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