



# Intersections of Peace: Refugee Children’s Unique Perspectives Through Storytelling and Arts-Based Methods

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## Abstract

Refugee children in this article offer a profoundly distinctive viewpoint, perceiving the world with a nuanced introspection. Young refugee participants from sub-Saharan backgrounds engaged in a series of storytelling workshops to explore their integration processes in Algeria. The constructed narratives, which were looked at through a qualitative lens, provided a unique perspective on the meaning of peace. Employing arts-based methods, the young storytellers draw upon a broader understanding of refugee realities lived in a host country, offering deep insights into the brutal conditions of their displacement journeys, human rights, and social justice. This article aims to celebrate the uniqueness of refugee children’s narratives and lived experiences while foregrounding their voices and perceptions. By doing so, it enriches the narrative beyond established paradigms in both host societies’ assumptions and the existing research on refugees and migration literature. The findings underscore the need for a more inclusive approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by refugee children, highlighting the transformative role of storytelling in shaping policies that are informed by their own lived experiences.

**Keywords** Refugee children · Narratives · Storytelling · Peace · Integration

## Introduction

*“Every minute, 20 people leave everything behind to escape war, persecution, or terror”* (UNHCR, 2023, para. 2).

The staggering statistic above illustrates the gravity of the ongoing global refugee crisis. By mid-2023, over 110 million individuals had been forcibly displaced, with approximately 75% seeking refuge in developing countries (UNHCR, 2023). As of

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June 5, 2023, Save the Children (2023) reported that more than 468 million children, or over 1 in 6 globally, were living in conflict-affected areas. This already sobering figure predates the escalation of the conflict in Palestine on October 7, 2023, a development that has significantly worsened the refugee crisis, rooted in decades of systemic apartheid and acts of genocide (Amnesty International, 2024; International Court of Justice, 2024). According to the UNHCR's, 2024 Mid-Year Trends report, by the end of June 2024, the number of forcibly displaced individuals worldwide had risen to approximately 122.6 million, reflecting a 5% increase from the end of 2023 (UNHCR, 2024). This alarming growth highlights the urgent need for effective global strategies to address displacement and its far-reaching consequences. Children affected by war and displacement face not only physical displacement but also profound emotional and developmental challenges, further emphasizing the necessity of child-centered research to better understand and address their unique needs.

While there is substantial research on refugee narratives, the experiences of refugee children remain critically under-explored in forced migration studies. Historically, scholarly attention has focused primarily on adult refugees, leaving children's distinct perspectives largely overlooked (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Losoncz, 2017). However, children represent more than half of the global refugee population (UNHCR, 2023), making their voices essential to understanding the full scope of the refugee experience. Their unique ways of interpreting and responding to displacement provide valuable insights into the emotional, social, and developmental dimensions of migration (Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2020).

## Research Context, Focus, and Design

This study addresses a critical gap in migration literature by shedding light on a demographic that remains under-represented in both scholarship and policy discourse: sub-Saharan refugees. Despite the urgent need for focused research, academic attention to this population remains sparse. Existing studies highlight the scarcity of research on overlapping vulnerabilities, such as the education of disabled refugees in the region, and the frequent neglect of personal narratives within sub-Saharan refugee populations (Frontiers in Education, 2020; Grech, 2022). These gaps are particularly significant when examining the experiences of refugee children, who face unique challenges as they navigate integration into host societies.

By focusing on narratives constructed in workshops centered on universal values (Tillman, 2001), this study addresses these gaps by examining the voices of refugee children. This article specifically highlights their engagement with the value of peace, exploring the unique and varied ways each child expressed its meaning within their stories. Data were gathered in a secondary Algerian national school that hosted both Algerian and sub-Saharan refugee children. The school operated within a francophone system, which facilitated the structural inclusion (Dryden-Peterson, 2018) of sub-Saharan refugee students, many of whom were fluent in French. Workshops were conducted in the school's arts and crafts classroom with participants aged 10 to 14.

Using arts-based methodologies, these workshops provided a space for children to process their experiences, construct narratives, and articulate their personal and collective understandings of peace, belonging, and integration. The children's perspectives on peace extended beyond the mere absence of conflict, reflecting a deeper longing for safety, stability, and community (Yohani, 2008; Rich, 2021). These insights, celebrated for their originality, contribute a timely and novel perspective to refugee and migration studies. This research underscores the importance of inclusive, child-centered refugee policies that recognize and amplify the unique contributions of young refugees to narratives of peace and integration (Kohli, 2022; Sanders & Munford, 2019).

## **Algeria as a Strategic Refugee Host: Geopolitical and Socioeconomic Dimensions**

Algeria, a key destination for sub-Saharan refugees, provides a distinct context for exploring refugee integration. Refugees from Chad, Mali, Niger, and Congo view Algeria as both a place of refuge and a potential gateway to Europe (UNHCR, 2022). Positioned at the crossroads of key migration routes, Algeria has become a focal point for examining local and transnational refugee dynamics. The capital, Algiers, serves as a primary settlement area for sub-Saharan refugees, shaping unique narratives influenced by the country's socio-political landscape and proximity to Europe.

Understanding sub-Saharan refugees' experiences in Algeria requires examining the broader drivers of forced migration. Conflicts and civil wars in their countries of origin, rooted in colonial legacies, weak state structures, and resource competition, have fuelled prolonged instability (Ogele, 2020; Stephane, 2020). These conflicts have led to economic stagnation, fiscal crises, and cycles of poverty (IMF, 2020; *Frontiers in Political Science*, 2024). Such interconnected factors shape refugee experiences in developing host countries, where they face challenges related to integration, survival, and access to opportunities.

The global refugee crisis places a disproportionate burden on developing countries, which host the majority of displaced populations. According to UNHCR (2022), about 83% of refugees are resettled in low- and middle-income countries, where resources are stretched thin. These countries often struggle with limited resources, strained public services, and insufficient international support, exacerbating vulnerabilities (Betts & Collier, 2017). In this context, Algeria plays a significant role, providing refuge to sub-Saharan populations despite its own socio-economic and political challenges. Refugees in Algeria face barriers to employment, education, and healthcare, hindering their long-term integration and economic self-sufficiency (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Theorizing Children's Agency and Voice in Adversity**

Recognizing refugee children as active participants marks a transformative shift in forced migration studies, challenging the historical marginalization of their voices

(Betancourt et al., 2013; Gaywood et al., 2020; Turton, 2022). Their narratives provide essential insights into displacement, revealing trauma, adaptation, and resilience often overlooked in adult-focused research (Hart and Tyrer, 2018; Gifford & Wells, 2021). These stories humanize the challenges of displacement, offering a clearer understanding of its effects on younger generations. Narratives serve as a transformative medium, allowing children to reflect, engage with social justice, and drive change (Phillips, 2010). This demonstrates how children actively interpret and reshape their experiences (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019; Yohani, 2008).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), particularly Articles 12 and 13, provides a foundation for recognizing children's rights to express views and participate in decisions affecting their lives (Freeman, 1983). This principal highlights child as active agents, though systemic barriers often limit their influence, necessitating structural reforms (Yin, 2024). In adversity, children assert control and navigate systemic vulnerabilities creatively, showing resilience despite power imbalances (Pohl, 2024). The CRC advocates a shift from viewing refugee children as passive subjects to recognizing them as contributors to discussions on displacement. Scholars like Alderson and Morrow (2011) emphasize children's social agency, asserting that they actively engage with their environments and broader social structures, shaping concepts such as peace and equality. This paradigm shift is operationalized in this study through participatory methodologies that center children's voices, using creative mediums to explore their meanings and navigate systemic challenges.

Further scholarship underscores children's ability to navigate adversity and contribute meaningfully. Ungar (2008) and Liebenberg and Ungar (2008) argue for recognizing children's voices as vital contributions to their well-being, shifting from protection to empowerment. Researchers also critique preconceived notions of childhood that obscure how children actively engage in social life (Boyden & De Berry, 2004). Recognizing children's resilience advances a more inclusive understanding of integration, identity, and justice. Refugee narratives, particularly those of children, reveal emotional and psychological dimensions that highlight inequalities and emphasize the need for child-centered policies (Wessells, 2016; Bajaj, 2017). Amplifying their voices helps researchers understand how displacement affects identity and social integration (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019; Hack-Polay et al., 2021).

### **Constructing Meaning Through Narratives: Bruner's Lens**

Jerome Bruner's theory of narrative construction (Bruner, 1991, Bruner, 1996) forms the foundation for understanding how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences through storytelling. Bruner posits that individuals construct narratives as a way to interpret and give meaning to their experiences, especially when those experiences are complex or fragmented. Narratives impose structure on life events, allowing individuals to make sense of seemingly chaotic experiences (Bruner, 1991). For refugee children, who have faced displacement and trauma, constructing a coherent narrative is crucial for processing their past and making sense of their present realities.

In this study, Bruner's framework guided the decision to use storytelling and creative narrative construction as central methods. These creative outlets provided the children with flexible, developmentally appropriate ways to construct narratives about peace, belonging, and integration. Through these methods, the children were able to articulate their experiences both verbally and visually, engaging with complex emotional themes in a way that felt manageable and meaningful to them.

### **Living Values Education (LVE) Framework and Cognitive Development**

Grounded in the Living Values Education (LVE) framework (Tillman, 2001), narrative construction workshops fostered emotional and cognitive development through storytelling, drawing, and collaging. LVE emphasizes value-based learning, encouraging children to explore and internalize universal values such as peace, respect, and empathy (Living Values Education, 2023). Through experiential and reflective practices, LVE creates a safe, inclusive space for children to process emotions and build resilience. This approach aligns with contemporary theories highlighting the role of creative expression in facilitating emotional healing and cognitive growth (Malchiodi, 2013). Research shows that creative methods like drawing and storytelling promote self-regulation and emotional expression, making them particularly effective for children facing adversity. By employing constructivist principles, LVE enables children to actively engage with their lived experiences and make sense of their realities within a supportive community (Vygotsky, 1978).

Jerome Bruner's theory of narrative construction and LVE's principles share an emphasis on meaning-making and holistic development, particularly in adversity. Bruner's assertion that narratives organize experiences and construct meaning resonates with LVE's focus on internalizing values like peace, respect, and empathy through storytelling and reflection (Bruner, 1996; Tillman, 2001). Both frameworks stress active engagement, portraying individuals as co-constructors of knowledge, a principle especially relevant for refugee children navigating complex challenges. Bruner's constructivist perspective, which highlights the interplay between past experiences and new understanding, aligns with LVE's participatory methodologies that encourage reflection and envisioning future possibilities in supportive environments (Tillman, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Both recognize the transformative power of reflection: Bruner focuses on cognitive coherence and emotional integration, while LVE emphasizes self-awareness and internalizing values.

For refugee children, this alignment highlights how narrative-based approaches, grounded in values education, help process trauma, build resilience, and foster belonging. While Bruner focuses on cognitive narrative construction, LVE embeds these processes within a moral framework fostering personal growth and social harmony. LVE has been widely implemented in schools, refugee camps, and community programs to support emotional resilience and peacebuilding. Across regions like Africa and the Middle East, LVE has empowered displaced children through creative, participatory activities that emphasize co-construction of meaning and a sense of community belonging.

## Conceptual Framework

### Conceptualizing Peace: A Foundation for Agency and Belonging

Scholars have examined peace through diverse frameworks, reflecting its multifaceted and context-dependent nature. Early peace studies distinguished between negative peace, defined as the absence of violence, and positive peace, centered on justice and societal harmony (Galtung, 1969). However, recent research critiques this binary as overly simplistic for addressing the complexities of contemporary conflicts and peacebuilding processes (Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2020). Contemporary frameworks advocate multidimensional approaches that incorporate lived experiences, structural inequalities, and cultural contexts, recognizing that peace is often shaped by local and relational dynamics (Lederach, 2010; Bar-Tal, 2021).

In child-centered studies, peace often reflects children's lived realities and developmental perspectives. Younger children frequently describe peace in tangible terms, such as the absence of conflict or the presence of safety. Older children, particularly those exposed to displacement or conflict, articulate peace through relational and aspirational elements, such as trust, community, and opportunities for self-expression (Coghlan, 2021; Hart, 2022). Participatory methodologies, including arts-based approaches, demonstrate that refugee children often conceptualize peace visually and symbolically, incorporating themes of familial bonds, freedom, and stability (Barakat & Milton, 2020). These findings suggest that children's conceptualizations of peace are dynamic, evolving with their experiences and aspirations, and highlight the need for peacebuilding initiatives that resonate with their unique perspectives.

### Navigating Complex Journeys: Refugee Children's Experiences Across Migratory Trajectories

Migratory trajectories encompass the complex journeys of refugees, spanning pre-migration, transit, and settlement phases. These trajectories are shaped by an interplay of structural forces and individual agency, reflecting the multifaceted realities of displacement (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Pre-migration experiences often involve conflict, persecution, or environmental crises, driving individuals to flee and initiating trauma and disruption (UNHCR, 2023). During transit, refugees face precarious conditions such as physical danger, exploitation, and prolonged instability in camps, which exacerbate vulnerabilities and disrupt children's education (Morrice, 2019; Dryden-Peterson, 2020). Settlement introduces additional challenges, including barriers to integration, education, and social belonging, compounded by xenophobia and restrictive policies (Zetter & Ruaudel, 2018).

Despite these adversities, children display remarkable agency and adaptability, navigating these phases while constructing identities and forming new senses of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2021; Hart, 2022). This study goes beyond isolated examinations of specific phases, offering children a space to reflect on their entire migratory journey and integration experiences. By capturing the interconnectedness of

these experiences, the study amplifies refugee children's voices, providing deeper insights into their resilience and the complexities of displacement.

### **Forced Displacement, Education, and Social Integration**

Forced displacement or migration, defined as the involuntary movement of people due to factors like conflict, persecution, environmental crises, or development-induced displacement, disrupts lives and poses significant challenges to social integration (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Education plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and rebuilding stability among refugee populations, with schools acting as bridges between refugee and host communities by promoting shared learning and integration. Achieving this, however, requires robust infrastructure and policies to prevent overburdening existing systems. Integration should respect and incorporate refugees' cultural and linguistic identities rather than focusing on assimilation, supporting resilience and identity reconstruction (Ager & Strang, 2008; Dryden-Peterson, 2020). Successful integration relies on fostering social connections, ensuring access to essential services, and creating culturally inclusive spaces (Betts & Collier, 2017; Morrice, 2019).

Children face particularly acute challenges, as disrupted education, trauma, and socio-economic barriers can impede their integration (Betancourt et al., 2013; Dryden-Peterson, 2020). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs have proven effective in addressing trauma and building trust, helping children navigate complex social dynamics in host communities (Bahl et al., 2021; Morrice, 2019). Integration experiences are further influenced by intersecting factors such as age, gender, and socio-economic status, which often heighten barriers to belonging and stability (Yuval-Davis, 2021; Chen & Schweitzer, 2019). Despite these challenges, refugee children often demonstrate agency and resilience, actively negotiating their environments to form new identities and a sense of belonging (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019). Institutional support, particularly through trauma-sensitive and inclusive teacher training, is vital to facilitating these adaptive strategies (UNESCO, 2019; Bahl et al., 2021).

### **Methodology**

This study integrates storytelling and drawing as its primary research tools, motivated by both theoretical and practical considerations. Arts-based methods have been recognized for their capacity to facilitate rich, child-centered inquiry, particularly in contexts involving vulnerable populations such as refugee children (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). From a theoretical standpoint, these approaches offer inclusive modes of expression that are not exclusively reliant on verbal communication; rather, they allow children to explore and represent complex concepts, such as peace, identity, and inclusion, through narrative and image (Malchiodi, 2012). In a practical sense, storytelling provides structured opportunities for children to construct personal narratives, thereby engaging with emotionally charged subjects in a guided yet creative

environment. Drawing complements this by providing a non-verbal channel of articulation, thereby supporting children who may have limited language proficiency or who find it difficult to convey traumatic experiences verbally (Malchiodi, 2012).

These methods are especially apt for research involving refugee children, many of whom face compounded vulnerabilities due to forced displacement and potential psychological distress. Existing literature indicates that arts-based approaches can serve both as therapeutic outlets and as catalysts for personal agency, fostering children's confidence and sense of identity (Cohen et al., 2017; Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). By facilitating forms of self-expression that accommodate varying degrees of verbal fluency and emotional readiness, storytelling and drawing ensure that participants can engage with sensitive subjects at their own pace and comfort level. This inclusionary focus also supports the trustworthiness of the data generated, given that children are more likely to share nuanced insights when afforded safe, non-intrusive modes of participation (Malchiodi, 2012).

### **Methodological and Epistemological Challenges**

Some potential limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Arts-based methods can pose interpretive complexities, requiring researchers to navigate the risks of over- or under-interpreting visual or narrative symbols (Leavy, 2015). Additionally, cultural contexts may shape how children depict certain themes, raising questions about cross-cultural interpretation and the transferability of findings. To address these challenges, the study relied on children's narratives and their interpretations of their creative outputs, such as drawings and arts-based participation. Encouraging children to reflect on and explain their work aligns with the constructivist approach, particularly as outlined in the theoretical perspectives of Bruner and the Living Values Education (LVE) framework. Both emphasize the importance of reflection and meaning-making in understanding lived experiences.

However, during the workshop on the value of peace, many children struggled to verbalize their thoughts, and only a few interpretations were shared. In these instances, their silence was respected, and the artwork was left uninterpreted. In this article, the intention with shared drawings is not to provide interpretations but to celebrate the diversity of the children's perspectives on peace. These methodological choices highlight the importance of reflexive, culturally sensitive analysis throughout the research process (Spyrou, 2020).

### **Participatory Approach: The Significance of Agency in Practice**

This study employed a participatory design to elevate children's agency in shaping the thematic direction of the workshops (Hart, 1992). At the beginning of each session, children voted on topics such as peace, diversity, and inclusion (Tillman, 2001) exercising control over the focal points of discussion. This voting process was informed by the principle that children are active social agents capable of contributing meaningfully to research, rather than passive subjects (James and James, 2012; Shier, 2001). This participatory voting process offered several advantages. First,

it encouraged children's investment in the research activities by allowing them to shape the agenda, ensuring that the topics were relevant to their lived experiences (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). Second, by involving children in thematic selection, the research remained responsive to their immediate concerns, thereby enhancing ecological validity. Third, the collaborative decision-making process elevated children's voices, ensuring they shaped both the process and outcomes, a stance aligned with ethical standards recognizing children's autonomy (Alderson, 2008; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). However, the voting process required careful facilitation to ensure that all participants had equal opportunities to influence the outcome, as disparities in confidence or language skills could potentially skew the results (Hart, 1992).

Beyond the voting process, children exercised agency through the freedom to select the tools they used to construct their narratives. These tools included storytelling, writing, collaging, and drawing, offering diverse modes of creative expression tailored to their preferences. Allowing children to choose their tools empowered them to engage meaningfully with the research, reinforcing their autonomy and respecting their individual creative capacities. However, this flexibility required maintaining coherence across diverse outputs and ensuring that the use of different tools did not complicate the analysis process (Tillman, 2001).

### **Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality**

Conducting research with vulnerable populations, particularly refugee children, requires stringent ethical measures to ensure their well-being and protection. Refugee children, often exposed to trauma and ongoing displacement, are highly susceptible to emotional distress. Ethical research design in this context involves balancing data collection with the need to prevent re-traumatization, respect participant autonomy, and ensure voluntary, beneficial participation (Morrow, 2008). This study followed ethical frameworks from the American Psychological Association (APA) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA), implementing specific measures tailored to the needs and vulnerabilities of the children.

### **Trauma-Sensitive Measures and Documentation**

Recognizing the specific vulnerabilities faced by refugee children, the study adopted a trauma-sensitive framework aimed at minimizing any risk of re-traumatization (Cohen et al., 2017). One of the most salient methodological decisions was to rely on detailed note-taking rather than video recording. While visual documentation could provide a richer dataset, it could also engender feelings of surveillance or invasiveness, potentially deterring authentic participation (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). This concern is especially pertinent for children with unresolved refugee claims, who may be sensitive to perceived monitoring (Bartels & Van Roy, 2021; Cullen & Salmon, 2022).

Field notes, conversely, enabled the researcher to capture participants' verbal and non-verbal cues without imposing an intrusive observational frame (Leavy, 2015). This approach alleviated some of the ethical dilemmas associated with visual

methods, such as threats to anonymity, heightened privacy risks, or inadvertent exposure of personal information (UNICEF, 2021). Despite potential drawbacks (e.g., the absence of certain visual details), the note-taking process was sufficiently comprehensive to document emotional and social dynamics. By prioritizing children's emotional well-being and privacy, the study further bolstered the trustworthiness and credibility of its findings (Brewer & Sparkes, 2019; Hart, 2022).

### **Informed Consent and Participant Selection**

The storytelling workshops included both refugee and non-refugee children, fostering diversity and collaboration to enrich the creative process. This inclusivity promoted mutual understanding and reinforced values of social cohesion and diversity. However, for the purpose of this study, only the data from refugee children were analyzed, aligning with the research focus on their integration experiences in Algeria. Including children from diverse cultural and experiential backgrounds required careful navigation to ensure all participants felt equally valued and included throughout the workshops.

To adhere to rigorous ethical standards, the study implemented robust participant recruitment and consent procedures. Refugee children and their families were invited to participate through an NGO, which served as a gatekeeper and facilitated the dissemination of consent forms and participant information sheets. These documents, available in both French and Arabic, ensured that parents or legal guardians fully understood the study's purpose, methods, and their children's rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. The NGO maintained constant communication with the families, supporting informed decision-making prior to the commencement of data collection in the school setting. Permission was also obtained from both the school administration and the NGO before beginning the workshops.

Children's assent was sought using age-appropriate explanations to introduce the study, outline its requirements, and explain their rights. A dedicated initial session was conducted to present the study and address any questions or concerns. Emphasizing that participation was entirely voluntary, children were assured they could opt out of specific activities or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). This approach respected both parental authority and children's developing autonomy, ensuring their comfort and empowerment throughout the research process. By combining thorough consent procedures with an inclusive and respectful methodology, the study created a safe and participatory environment for all involved.

### **Researcher Reflexivity and Cultural Sensitivity**

Researcher positionality was an essential dimension of this project, shaping both methodological choices and theoretical practices. The principal investigator, of Algerian nationality, brought cultural and linguistic insights that facilitated rapport with some participants in this context (mainly, the NGO, the school and the Algerian children). However, there were initial concerns that being perceived as Algerian by

the refugee participants might limit their willingness to interact openly. Surprisingly, throughout the workshops, participants shared their thoughts comfortably, particularly through the use of arts-based methods. This highlighted the methodological strength of arts-based research (ABR) in minimizing potential boundaries and sensitivities between researchers and participants, enabling a more open and expressive dynamic.

Cultural sensitivity and reflexivity were critical aspects of this research, given the diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds of the participants. The workshops were conducted in the arts and crafts classroom with the presence of the researcher and the English teacher, who, like the researcher, was fluent in both French and Arabic. This linguistic capability ensured that all children could communicate comfortably, fostering an inclusive and supportive research environment. The researcher was acutely aware of the varied religious and cultural practices of the participants and took care to respect these throughout the study. Workshops were structured to accommodate both boys and girls equally, and efforts were made to be mindful of religious observances to avoid potential conflicts. These measures aligned with BERA's (2018) ethical standards, emphasizing the importance of respecting participants' cultural and religious contexts.

Navigating the varied backgrounds of refugee children also required ongoing reflexivity, including continuous self-assessment of assumptions, biases, and power differentials (Spyrou, 2020). Regular journaling and peer debriefing sessions were employed to interrogate interpretive standpoints and to mitigate potential imbalances during data collection and analysis. This reflexive approach extended to the interpretation of artistic outputs. While the researcher's familiarity with certain cultural practices proved beneficial, it was equally vital to remain open to symbolic meanings specific to each child's personal and cultural context (Leavy, 2015). Striking a balance between empathetic understanding and methodological rigor was integral to ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Together, these practices foregrounded ethical and reflexive research, fostering an environment where the children felt valued and respected in sharing their narratives and creative expressions.

By integrating arts-based and participatory methods within a trauma-sensitive and ethically rigorous framework, this study foregrounded refugee children's agency in exploring themes of peace, diversity, and inclusion. Storytelling and drawing were purposefully selected to accommodate varying linguistic proficiencies and emotional readiness, offering creative, accessible modes of expression for children who have experienced displacement. The voting process further reinforced participants' autonomy, enhancing their engagement and ensuring that the research remained grounded in the issues most salient to their lived experiences.

### **Thematic Narrative Analysis: Revealing Insights into Peace and Integration**

Key themes such as peace and belonging emerged from the children's narratives and creative outputs, addressing the research questions on their experiences of displacement, identity formation, and adaptation. Symbols such as doves, open skies, and

smiling faces reflected diverse representations of personal meanings of peace and potential aspirations for inclusion and belonging. Instead of interpreting these symbols, the study relied on children's own explanations where available, emphasizing their agency and unique perspectives.

The thematic narrative analysis focused on celebrating the richness and diversity of children's perceptions, using their artwork and interpretations to explore similarities and differences in how they conceptualized peace. This approach aligns with arts-based research principles, which prioritize the voices of participants and emphasize the co-construction of meaning through creative mediums (Leavy, 2015). The analysis sought to uncover shared patterns and unique expressions of peace and belonging, offering a nuanced understanding of how children navigate and make sense of their lived experiences of displacement and integration (Riessman, 2007).

## Unique Insights into Refugee Children's Perceptions of Peace

Refugee children's visual expressions offer profound insights into how they conceptualize peace amidst displacement, loss, and resilience. Through their artwork, these children express the emotional weight of their experiences, illustrating peace not as a distant aspiration but as a fragile, deeply personal journey intertwined with their past and hopes for the future. This section explores recurring themes in their drawings, including artistic representations of peace, journeys through the sea, notions of home, sports, and universal symbols of peace. These themes reveal how the children construct meaning around peace and their yearning for stability and safety.

### Artistic Expression of Peace: The Power of Visual Expression

The refugee children in this study consistently gravitated toward drawing as their primary medium for articulating concepts of peace, unlike other workshops where writing was more common than drawing. Trauma-informed pedagogy underscores the importance of providing children who have experienced trauma with non-verbal forms of expression (Bath, 2008). Drawing allows them to process and communicate complex emotions, particularly when verbal expression may feel too difficult or inaccessible (Malchiodi, 2012). For the refugee children, drawing became a therapeutic outlet to externalize emotions, transforming abstract feelings of hope, loss, and trauma into tangible visual forms.

In many drawings, displacement and loss emerged as central themes, represented symbolically through elements such as the sea, homes, and imagery of grief. Children were given the opportunity to interpret and reflect on their own narratives, though in most cases, these are presented without additional commentary. As a researcher, I was reluctant to impose my own interpretations. Therefore, the following section will focus on presenting the narratives as they are, while discussing their significance within the broader discourse of displacement and integration. These symbols conveyed both the physical realities of migration, and the emotional burden carried by the children.

## Journeys and Displacement

One of the most common themes in the children's depictions of peace was the sea, representing both danger and hope. Figure 1 below represents Messi's story of a boat against a dark blue backdrop reflects themes of journeys and displacement, central to his experience as a refugee. The boat could be a story of a physical journey across land or sea and the aspirational journey toward peace and stability. Rather than dissecting its symbolic meaning, the drawing is presented as a visual expression of Messi's lived experience, reflecting his broader search for safety.

In Messi's drawing titled *Peace is the Destination*, the boat becomes a central element, reflecting the potentially aspects of hope for peace amid their displacement. The title itself conveys the notion that peace is not only a distant hope but a goal toward which the refugee journey moves. Constructing peace as the "destination" of their journey aligns with the way refugees use narratives to process displacement and project a hopeful future. Messi's drawing can be seen as part of this narrative construction, where peace is conceptualized not as a passive state but as an active goal that gives meaning to the journey.

Similarly, Malik's drawing (Fig. 2) shows a small boat amidst dark, swelling waves, carrying two figures, one alive and one deceased as described by him. This stark contrast between life and death, in fact, mirrors the complexity of the refugee experience. Malik's artwork captures the emotional tension between survival and vulnerability, illustrating the trauma and grief that refugee children carry as they navigate both physical and emotional losses (Herman, 1992).

The emotional weight of loss was especially evident in some of the children's drawings. In Malik's depiction of the sea, the presence of a deceased figure in the boat is discussed in the literature in relation with the intense grief and survivor's guilt experienced by many refugee children. Koser (2011) notes that migration, particularly by sea, is characterized by profound danger while also offering a glimmer of hope and opportunity for displaced individuals. Water in migration narratives frequently symbolizes both the physical barriers and the emotional volatility of displacement. The figures at the water's edge in Malik's drawing, one standing and one lying down, as explained by him, evoke the contrast between survival and vulnerability, highlighting the tension between safety

**Fig. 1** Drawing by Messi from Niger: "Peace is the destination" (Boukhari, 2023)



**Fig. 2** Drawing by Malik from Mali: peace in troubled waters



and risk. This duality reflects the metaphorical nature of refugee journeys, where the sea serves as both a literal crossing point and a symbol of the liminal space between danger and the pursuit of peace.

Water is often used as a metaphor in migration discourse, symbolizing both the unstoppable flow of migration and its inherent dangers (Porto, 2022). In media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis, water metaphors portrayed the journey as both threatening and hopeful, capturing the ambivalence of refugee experiences. Malik's drawing thus embodies the complex interplay between life and death, reflecting broader refugee narratives that grapple with survival, displacement, and the search for safety. Through this lens, the artwork not only visualizes the physical journey across the sea but also encapsulates the emotional and psychological challenges faced by refugees.

### Home, Stability, and Belonging

Houses featured prominently in the children's depictions of peace, symbolizing both the physical and emotional aspects of home. In migration literature, homes often represent stability, safety, and a sense of belonging, concepts that are particularly meaningful for refugee children (Mallett, 2004). For refugee children, the house serves as an emblem of both what has been lost and what they hope to regain. Bright elements like suns and trees in many of the drawings suggest the children's desire to associate home with peace, security, and renewal, envisioning a future that contrasts with the instability of their current circumstances.

In Meriam's drawing, she depicts her home in Chad, expressing a longing for the place she left behind. Similarly, other children, such as Zeina and Ali, also chose to represent houses as symbols of peace, demonstrating the emotional significance of home in their visions of stability and safety (Figs. 3, 4, 5, and 6).



Fig. 3 Drawing by Meriam from Chad: peace is “my home in Chad”



Fig. 4 Drawing of peace by Zeina from Chad

### Sports as a Metaphor for Peace: Football and Community Building

Among the most vibrant expressions of peace were the children's depictions of football. Sports, particularly football, served as a metaphor for peace, connection, and community. For many refugee children, football represented a space where the difficulties of their lives could be momentarily replaced by the simplicity of teamwork and shared goals (Coakley, 2002; Henley, 2005). Their colorful drawings of football matches reflected the joy and connection they found through play, where peace was achieved through collaboration and mutual respect (Fig. 7).

Football plays an important role in the emotional and social recovery of refugee children. Through participation in team sports, these children can rebuild a sense of



**Fig. 5** Drawing of peace by Muadh from Niger



**Fig. 6** Drawing of peace by Ali from Mali

identity and trust, experiencing peace as something tangible and achievable through collaboration. Zizou's football match scene, with its colorful, joyful players, conveys the sense of empowerment and belonging that sports offer, reinforcing the idea that peace is an active, collective pursuit. Bilal from Congo also drew a football field and spoke openly about the game, highlighting how football became a source of hope and a connection to normalcy and childhood (Fig. 8).

In literature, sports, especially football, also played a role in the children's trauma recovery by providing a sense of normalcy and an opportunity to heal emotionally (Henley, 2005). On the football field, the children could experience moments of



**Fig. 7** Drawing by Zizou from Mali: peace is captured in this 2016 World Cup moment (Boukhari, 2023)

empowerment, where peace was not just an abstract goal but a reality they could achieve through teamwork, cooperation, and shared success.

### **Universal Symbols of Peace: Doves, the Earth, and the Universe**

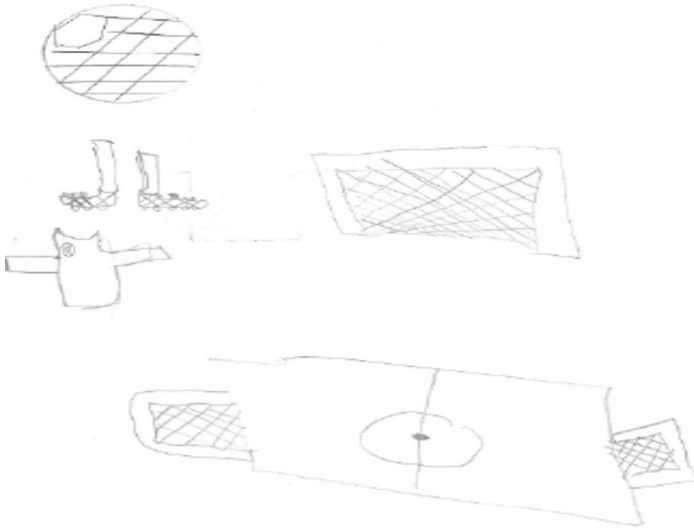
The refugee children frequently used universal symbols of peace in their drawings, such as doves, the Earth, and the universe, connecting their personal experiences with broader, globally recognized symbols of harmony.

#### **Doves**

The image of the dove appeared often in the children's drawings, symbolizing peace, freedom, and the hope for new beginnings. In many cultures, doves are emblems of reconciliation and tranquillity (Roelandt & O'Brien, 2014), and for the refugee children, the dove's flight represented the possibility of peace rising above their tumultuous circumstances. Mohamed from Congo, for example, drew a dove flying over a desolate landscape, symbolizing his yearning for peace and freedom (Figs. 9, 10, and 11).

#### **The Earth and the Universe**

Some children depicted the Earth or the universe, expanding their visions of peace beyond personal or national borders to encompass a global ideal. These images, filled with swirling galaxies and bright stars, suggested that peace for these children



**Fig. 8** Drawing by Bilal from Congo: peace was in the football field (Boukhari, 2023)

was not just about their individual survival but a broader hope for global harmony and unity (Theobald, 2016).

The dove, often featured in the children's drawings, is a potent symbol of peace and healing, as commonly discussed in art therapy literature. Malchiodi (2013) emphasizes how art therapy helps children process trauma through visual representations that transcend verbal limitations. In conflict and displacement settings, the dove, especially when paired with an olive branch, symbolizes reconciliation and hope. Feen-Calligan et al. (2020) also highlight the role of art in helping refugee children express desires for unity and global peace, as seen in some drawings depicting a flag-filled globe (Figs. 12, 13, and 14).

The refugee children's visual expressions of peace were rich in emotional depth and symbolic meaning. Whether illustrating houses, seas, football matches, or doves, they used vivid imagery to convey their experiences of loss, hope, and the

**Fig. 9** Drawing of peace by Murad from Mali



**Fig. 10** Drawing of peace by Mohamed from Congo



**Fig. 11** Drawing of peace by Meriam from Chad



desire for stability. These narratives, particularly those reflecting loss and survival, demonstrate how peace for these children intertwines with healing, belonging, and the hope for a better future. Through narrative construction and visual storytelling, the children conveyed peace not merely as an abstract ideal but as a deeply personal journey toward healing and restoration.

Drawings featuring the universe and cosmic elements reflect a tradition of using universal symbols to represent peace. Depictions of the Earth and cosmic imagery, such as suns and planets, symbolize the interconnected human experience and a shared responsibility for peace and unity. These themes suggest that peace transcends individual or local conflicts, reaching a global or universal scale. Visual art contributes to peacebuilding by offering new ways to imagine peace, not just in the context of immediate conflict but on a global level. Symbols like the globe or cosmos extend the moral imagination toward peace, linking it to collective planetary responsibility and a universal vision of reconciliation and harmony (Mitchell, 2020).



Fig. 12 Drawing of peace by Marwa from Niger



Fig. 13 Drawing of peace by Soma from Mali



**Fig. 14** Drawing of peace by Hanu from Chad

Art can act as a transformative tool in conflict resolution, where universal symbols signify hope for global cooperation and unity in peace efforts. These symbols carry emotional and moral weight, suggesting that achieving peace requires collective effort across humanity and beyond, encompassing the natural world and universe (Bell et al., 2019). In this context, the children's depictions of cosmic and global imagery in the peace workshop reflect aspirations for peace as a universal condition. This artistic choice aligns with broader peacebuilding efforts, where art engages with global ideas of responsibility and unity.

## Discussion

This study provides rich insights into how refugee children understand and experience concepts of peace, resilience, and integration through their creative narratives and artwork. By employing arts-based participatory methods, this research foregrounds children's voices, demonstrating that their definitions of peace and belonging transcend abstract ideals. Instead, they are vividly intertwined with concrete, emotionally charged experiences, a fact made evident in the children's choice of images (e.g., houses, the sea, football) to represent both their past traumas and their hopeful visions of unity and stability (Bruner, 1991).

One of the most striking aspects of the findings is the clear sense of agency these children display. While popular discourses often construct refugee children as passive or in need of saving, the data reveal children actively renegotiating their

identities, forging social connections, and envisioning inclusive communities. Football, for instance, emerges not merely as a recreational activity but as a *social equalizer* that transcends language barriers and cultural differences. This underscores how shared play can foster solidarity and community, suggesting that peace-building efforts involving refugee children should harness such communal activities to promote resilience and mutual understanding.

### Theoretical Implications

In critically examining the children's perspectives, the study engages with and extends existing theoretical frameworks. Corsaro's (2005) theory of interpretive reproduction is particularly relevant: rather than absorbing social norms in a unidirectional manner, children actively reconstruct these norms within their unique sociocultural contexts of forced migration. The study shows how children's engagement with broader ideas of peace and belonging is not simply derivative of adult discourses; instead, they adapt and remix these ideals to suit their lived realities. This process accentuates children's capacity to contribute novel insights into social institutions, effectively "globalizing" Corsaro's framework by demonstrating how forced migration contexts foster advanced socio-moral engagement at a young age.

Additionally, the children's accelerated moral reasoning and social awareness challenge long-standing developmental theories such as Piaget's (1932) stage-based model. This study advances discussions on child development by questioning the universality of Piaget's trajectory. While Piaget's contributions remain invaluable, the experiences of refugee children illustrate how extraordinary circumstances of upheaval can catalyze advanced capacities for moral reasoning and social awareness, surpassing traditional developmental milestones. Recognizing these children's potential and drawing on their insights not only informs theoretical debates but also leads to more impactful, participatory models of education and integration. Through child-centered, arts-based engagements, researchers, educators, and policymakers can foster conditions where refugee children's voices, shaped by deep, context-driven wisdom, help reimagine our collective understanding of peace, community, and the possibilities of childhood.

### Policy and Practice Considerations

From a policy perspective, the study's findings strongly suggest the need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive education and integration programs. Incorporating arts-based participatory methods, such as drawing, storytelling, and communal sports, can serve as powerful, low-threshold entry points for children who have endured disruption and loss. Such methods do not merely "capture" children's experiences; they also validate children's agency by allowing them to co-create spaces where their voices are recognized. This dynamic approach to child-centered engagement aligns with calls for more inclusive policymaking that harnesses the insights of youth, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds (Clark & Moss, 2011; Malchiodi, 2013).

Critically, the study highlights that integration processes must move beyond academic inclusion and linguistic assimilation. True social cohesion involves acknowledging the emotional and cultural dimensions of displacement, encouraging peer and community relationships that mitigate isolation, and leveraging communal activities (e.g., sports, art clubs) that children themselves identify as fostering a sense of solidarity. Such inclusive environments can be key to building resilience and shared belonging in multicultural societies, thereby enhancing the long-term well-being of both refugee children and their host communities.

## Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to academic debates and policy discussions by illustrating how refugee children, often overlooked in discussions about conflict, displacement, and integration, possess advanced capacities for resilience, moral reasoning, and creative meaning-making. Their reflections on peace not only expand Corsaro's (2005) interpretive reproduction framework to account for global forces impacting children's lives but also challenge Piaget's (1932) strictly stage-based view of development. In doing so, the research invites us to adopt more dynamic, context-sensitive models that appreciate the profound effect of forced migration on children's growth and perspectives.

By foregrounding arts-based participatory methods, the study underscores the transformative potential of creative and inclusive pedagogies. Such methods are shown to be particularly effective in promoting healing and a sense of ownership over personal narratives, while also empowering children to imagine and articulate collective visions for social cohesion. When integrated into educational and psychosocial support structures, these approaches can recalibrate how communities, policymakers, and researchers collaborate with young refugee populations.

## Directions for Future Research

To build on these insights, future research should explore larger and more diverse samples, including different age groups and regional backgrounds, to capture the complexity of refugee children's experiences across cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable in examining how children's constructions of peace and belonging evolve over time, and how these narratives interact with systemic factors such as national policy changes, shifts in public opinion, and variations in community receptivity.

Ultimately, this study urges a shift in how researchers, educators, and policymakers engage with refugee children: recognizing them not merely as recipients of services or objects of study, but as proactive agents shaping their own social worlds. By fostering environments that genuinely listen to and implement children's perspectives, we can support the development of more inclusive, culturally attuned, and socially just communities, realizing a more holistic vision of peace in which all members, including displaced children, have a stake and a voice.

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request. Due to ethical considerations and participant confidentiality, access to the data is restricted.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** The study underwent a rigorous ethical clearance process. The PhD project was conducted in two distinct phases, each requiring separate ethical approval. The application for the second phase, which informs the content of this article, was thoroughly reviewed and subsequently approved by the University of Bath Ethical Committee.

**Informed Consent** All informed consent forms were provided in both Arabic and French to ensure linguistic inclusivity. Separate consent forms were prepared for different types of participants (e.g., NGO members, the hosting school). In this particular study, consent for children's participation was obtained from their parents through the NGO that served as the liaison with both the families, the school, and the researcher. Children aged 10–14 were also asked to provide their assent prior to participating in any workshops related to this research. This process was repeated throughout the 7 workshops of the study.

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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