



wall painting in a group home of Finnish Red Cross in Turku

# *Art Making Feeds Hope* **Creative Groups with Young Asylum Seekers**

22 April 2021, SOCNET98

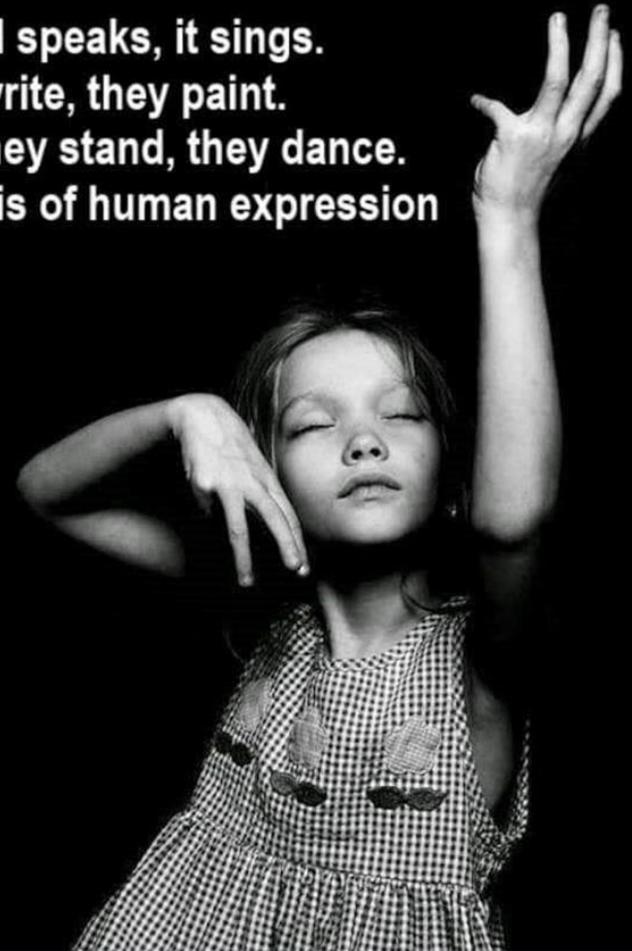
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# HUMAK®

**Creativity**  
is, and has always been,  
essential for humans,  
everywhere in the world.

**Before a child speaks, it sings.  
Before they write, they paint.  
As soon as they stand, they dance.  
Art is the basis of human expression**

*Phylicia Rashad*

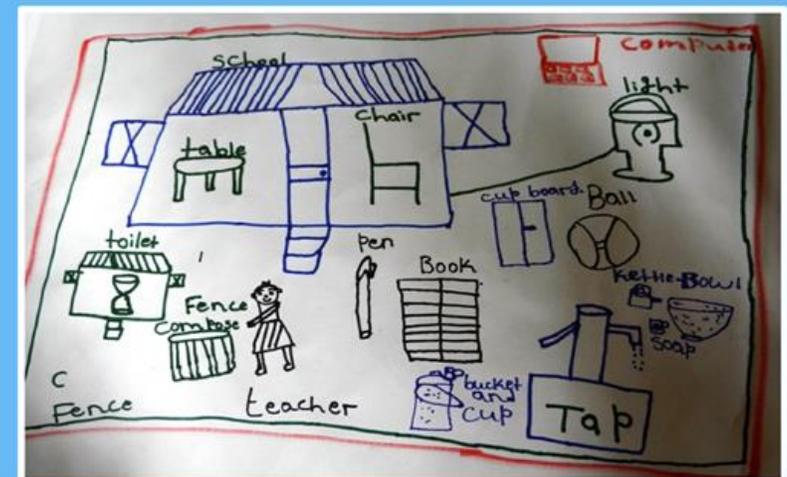


# My background

- Passionate about arts, creativity, equity in education & well-being
- Field work experience with UNICEF in post-conflict countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Uganda, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso and Niger): expressive arts helped children & youth cope and find joy in challenging situations. - I wanted to learn more and studied art therapy in Canada.
- Art groups with children, youth & women in France (cancer patients), Finland (asylum seekers / Red Cross) and Uganda (Grace Villa, home for vulnerable girls)
- Master of Arts, Art Therapist, Community Educator, Solution-Focused Brief Therapist & Coach



## CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOLING Baseline Assessment in Sierra Leone



# 80 million forcibly displaced people

- 86 % reside in developing countries
- War and violence
- Risks and dangers
- In 2015, Finland received ten times more asylum seekers than the previous year. About 10 % (3024) were unaccompanied minors.

(UNHCR 2021, Finnish Immigration Service 2017)



in 2016, over 5000 migrants  
drowned in the Mediterranean Sea  
while trying to reach Europe.

# Asylum seekers need psycho-social support (PSS)

- Asylum seekers & undocumented migrants have to cope with uncertainty.
- Traumatic experiences are common.
- However, not everyone gets traumatized and it is possible to survive trauma (post-traumatic growth)
- Unaccompanied minors are the most vulnerable and many of them (30 - 40%) suffer from traumatic stress, insomnia, anxiety and depression.

**Note: Normal reactions to an abnormal life situation!**

(Attanayake et al. 2009, Betancourt et al. 2012, Tuomola 2016)

# Expressive arts can play an important role in PSS

- **Social support, compassion by the community, and optimism** reinforce young asylum seekers' mental health. (Castaneda et al. 2018)
- In hospitals, music and art decrease anxiety and hormonal stress: the level of cortisol is lower. Art therapy alleviates the symptoms of traumatic stress, anxiety and depression. (WHO 2019)
- Expressive art making in a safe, holding environment can play an important role in the PSS for young asylum seekers.



# Power of imagination



“Alone on the ocean  
I am here but also elsewhere  
the happiness  
of being a dreamer  
allows me to escape  
to other worlds  
always with my compass”

(a 17 years old cancer patient  
in hospital Édouard Rist, Paris, 2016)

# Art Therapy

- The term 'art therapy' first used by Adrian Hill in 1942.

“an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.” (AATA’s definition; see also [CATA: What is Art Therapy?](#))

- Theoretical approaches:
  - Psychodynamic: Freud & Jung
  - Humanistic: e.g. Carl Roger’s person-centered approach, Gestalt, Erickson
  - Cognitive-behavioral: thoughts & behavior
  - Narrative: focus on personal story & meaning making
  - Solution-focused: client’s strengths & support systems, focus on the present and future
  - Integrative: combines many approaches, based on the client’s needs
- Any trauma work requires collaboration of experienced, trained mental health professionals to ensure the best possible care.

# Trauma causes difficulties to talk

- Trauma survivors usually find it difficult to talk after a traumatic event.
- Brain research / PET scans:  
**Broca's area** (a section of the brain responsible for speech and language) tends to shut down when a trauma survivor attempts to speak.
- Art therapy interventions that allow self-expression through image making are likely to be more effective help than verbal interventions alone.  
(Malchiodi 2015)



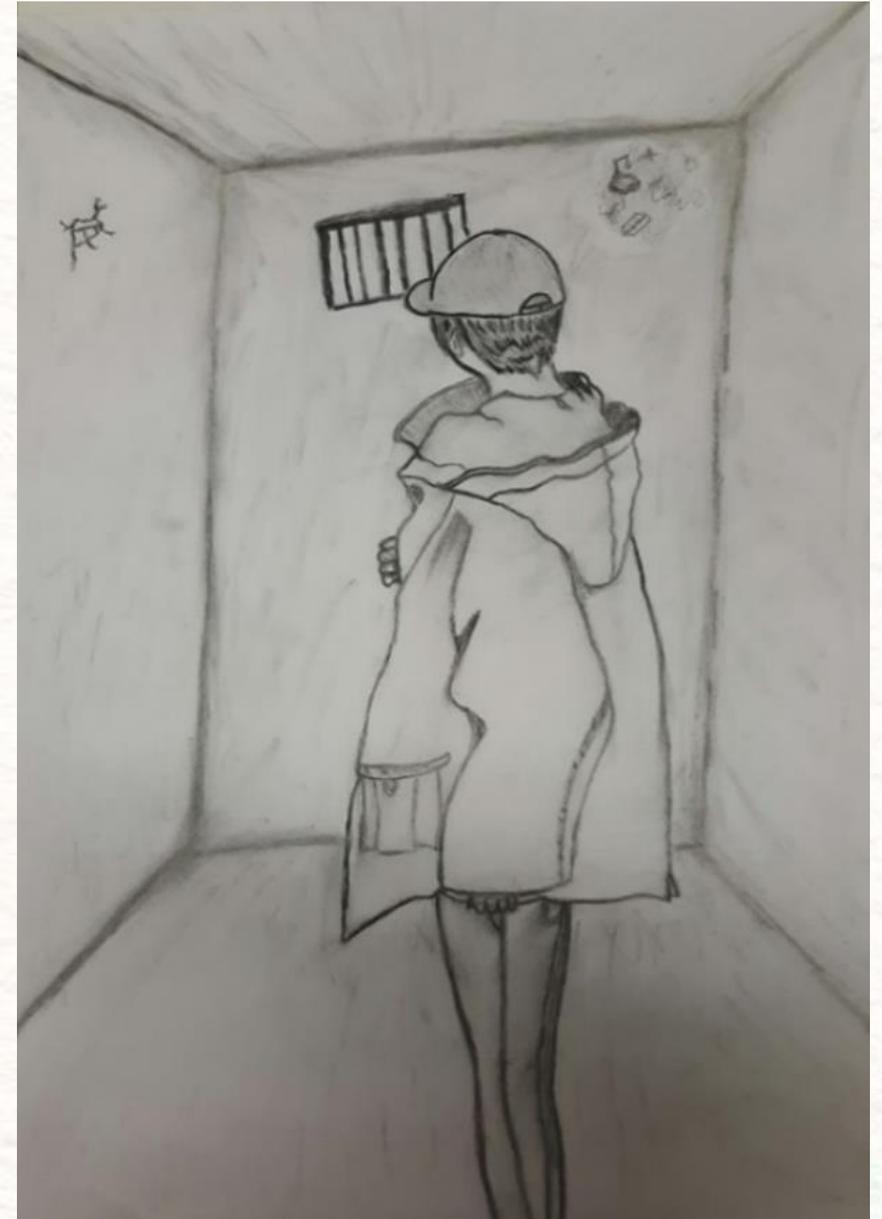
Picture: Elisa Riva, Pixabay

“Not that long ago it was regularly suggested that it was better to forget than remember traumatic events and that children who witnessed violence would eventually stop thinking about their nightmarish memories.

Fortunately, we now know the importance of acknowledging, validating, and, when needed, providing mental health intervention to help the smallest witnesses tell their stories.

**Creative acts, as simple as drawings, give young survivors a voice when silence is self-imposed or imposed by others.”**

(Malchiodi 2008)



# Resilience can be learned

- Roots in the Latin verb 'resilire': to rebound
- In psychology: positive adaptation in the context of risk or adversity
- Majority of children show resilience even after severe adversities.
- Resilience can be fostered and learned life-long but neuroplasticity is greater earlier in life.

**Timely support is needed to enhance children's self-esteem and executive function skills\* that foster resilience.**

\*e.g. emotion regulation, attention directing, flexible thinking, planning, decision-making, and interpersonal skills

(Masten 2014, Malchiodi 2015)

# Safety and empathy

- Cultivating safety, empathy and internal resources is important in all psychological first aid or PSS.
- Goals for the creative groups with young asylum seekers:
  1. managing emotions and stress
  2. reducing isolation
  3. identifying strengths & resources
  4. learning self-worth
  5. cultivating hope
- Important: establish trust, go slowly, remember cultural sensitivity and individual needs, allow all emotions and feelings, empower the participants to make their own choices

# Observations

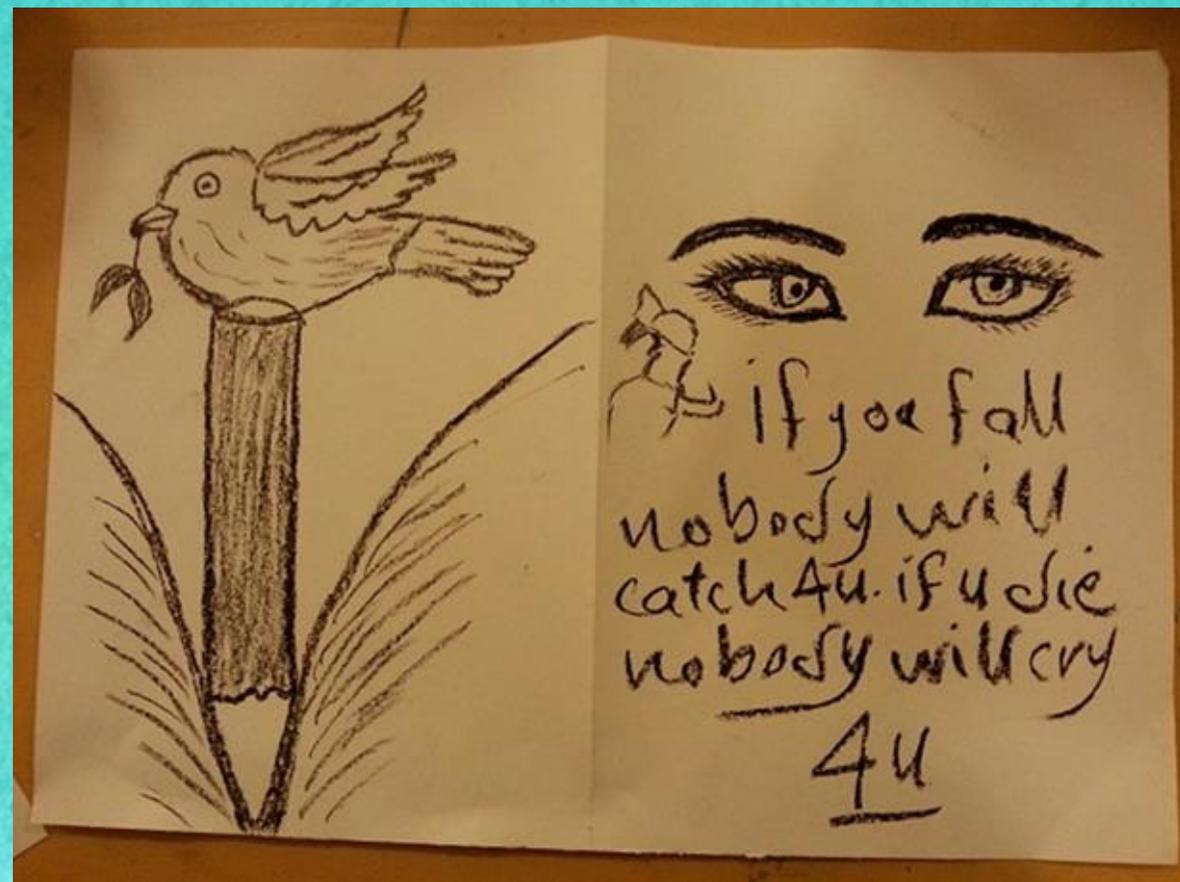
- At the group home, some of the young participants (12-16 years old) had difficulties to calm down and even sit in the beginning.
- Hyperarousal is common among traumatized children and youth: difficulties with self-regulation.
- Art making offers comforting and calming experiences that decrease anxiety and fear.
- From “mess making” (common with traumatized children) towards more concentration, relaxation and joy



Art making process of a 12 years old boy: from “mess making” to great concentration



*"Two boats from Asia to Europe.  
The other one fell. My mother died."  
(12 years old boy)*







title of the collage: *"my hopes"*

# Need to be seen and heard

- Adolescence is always marked by dramatic physical, emotional, and social changes.
- The unaccompanied minors are facing tremendous challenges without support from their families.
- Through visual arts or other creative media (music, dance, drama etc.), a young person can be seen and heard - **even without a common language.**



# Culturally diverse contexts

Ethical practice requires:

- respect for cultural diversity and local knowledge
- constant identity work and self-reflection to examine own values, beliefs & biases
- meeting each person as a unique individual, not a "product" of a culture
- understanding one's own need for support, supervision & self-care

## Feedback from the youth



- 8 interviewees (2 girls, 6 boys), countries of origin: Afghanistan, Angola and Somalia
- Only two had made art before the art group at the Red Cross Group Home in 2015, the others tried art making for the first time.
- For the majority of the participants, art making with others:
  - felt soothing and calming
  - helped forget other things
  - enabled self-expression
  - reduced the sense of loneliness

- *"Stress went away when I put things in the pictures from my head. Everybody was together, we talked and helped each other. We laughed together."*
- *"My art woke up."*
- *"The bad thoughts went away."*





Art exhibition at the Red Cross Reception Centre in Turku, Finland



Name of the exhibition: **Hope**  
(published with Hadi Rahimi's permission)

# Art making fosters resilience

Expressive art making in a safe, holding environment fosters resilience in many ways:

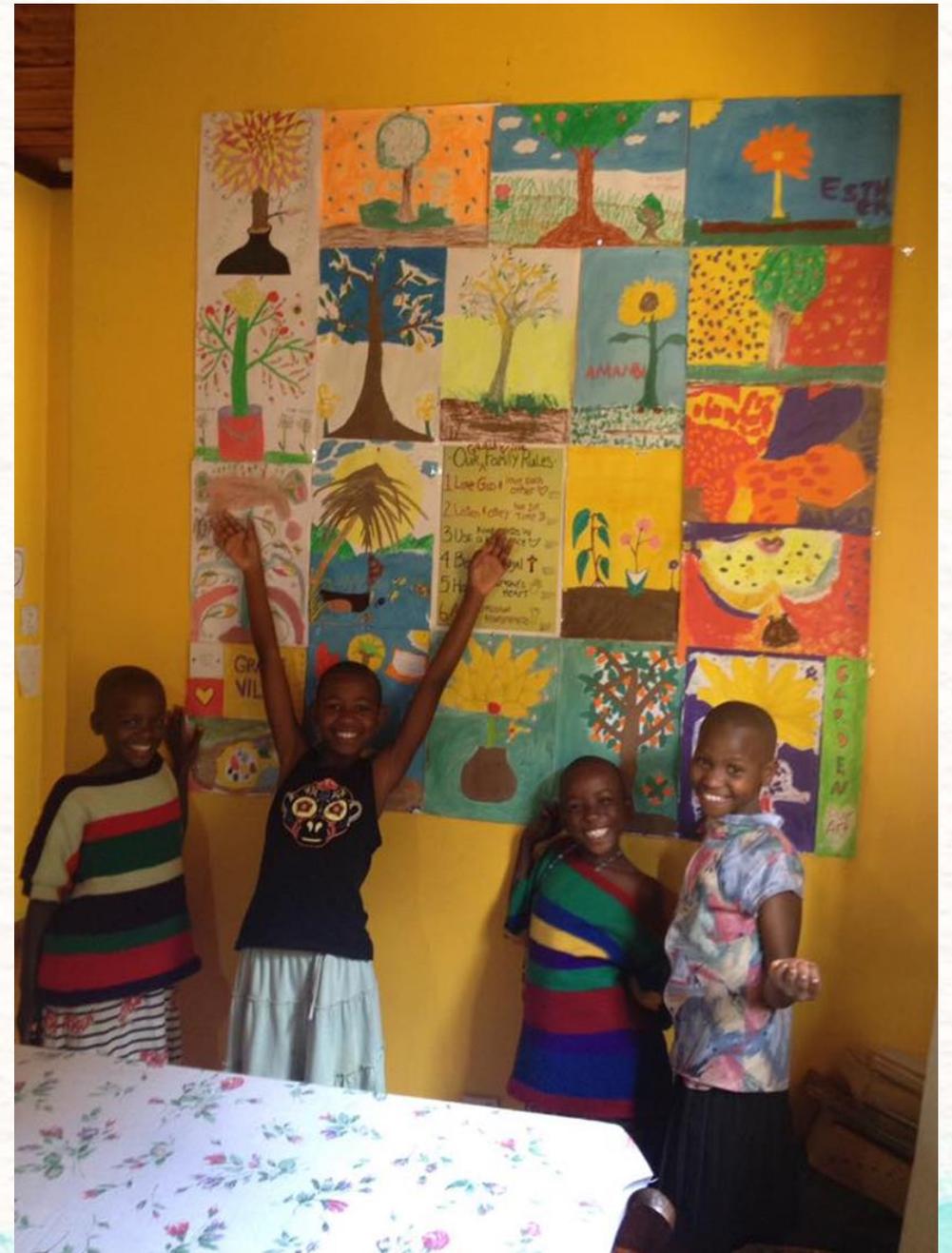
- non-verbal, creative **self-expression**
- reduces stress, anxiety and depression
- insights and mastery experiences
- sense of **agency**
- group: participation, peer support and a sense of **belonging**



Let's offer  
more possibilities  
for creative  
self-expression!

**"Together we are more  
beautiful than alone."**

girls at [Grace Villa, Uganda](#) in 2016  
(with permission of Ruth Ndyabahika)



Kiitos! Merci! Thank you!



**"Peace bird"** from a Group Home of Red Cross Reception Centre in Turku, Finland

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